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What is the movie industry's greatest decade? The '70s, which gave us Jaws, Star Wars and The Godfather? What about the '90s, with Goodfellas, Pulp Fiction and The Big Lebowski? Could it even be the '80s, with E.T., This Is Spinal Tap and, um, Weird Science? We can probably all agree that it's not the '00s, and yet equally no sane person would argue that the last ten years haven't been the greatest for videogames since William Higinbotham wrestled *Tennis For Two* out of his laboratory oscilloscope just over 50 years ago.

One of the key differences between games and movies is that the former medium is still going through a fundamental learning process today, while the latter's growing pains ended some years ago (it is about 70 years older, after all). Because of their relative states of evolution, gaming is changing more noticeably year on year, which helps to make it the more stimulating medium. Yes, you can use tech such as Twitter to communicate with friends – and strangers – about the scene you're all simultaneously watching in Blade Runner, for example, but it doesn't affect the experience on as fundamental a level as online play changes the process of playing a game (for better and worse).

On the flipside, the unstoppable advances in gaming's technical components have also restricted its growth, with development teams forced to learn new ways of doing things every time a new generation of hardware is introduced. Hollywood may have recently taken to incorporating stereoscopic 3D into its biggest hitters, but in comparative terms the movie industry has it easy.

Twenty-three years separate the release of James Cameron's Aliens and Avatar, and CG special effects have hardly been standing still in the intervening time, but who would pick the 2009 film as the better one? It's not just a matter of tech or time, of course, but what will games be like in 23 years? Hopefully, we'll have more to show for such evolution than merely improved presentation.

But that's a long way off. For now, our look at some of the many things that made the '00s gaming's greatest decade begins on page 66.



Image from Dragon Age: Origins, courtesy of BioWare

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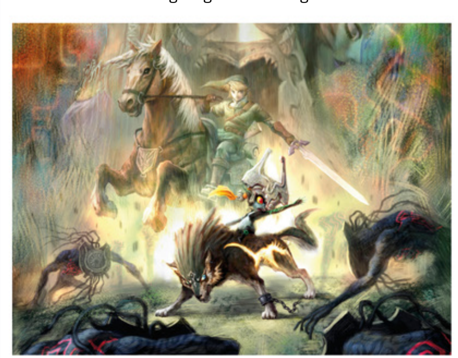
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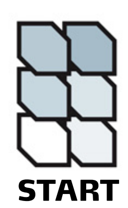
Review





START




START

ONLINE

World of Blizzard

Steam, Xbox Live and Facebook are hard acts to follow. We ask Blizzard what it now takes to craft a global gaming network

It took the absurd success of *World Of WarCraft* to eclipse Blizzard's earlier achievements. Back in 1996, Battle.net was one of the industry's most far-sighted creations, the first of its kind: an online service built into the games themselves. The multiplayer staples of the day, and for years to come, relied on external browsers to organise matches – creating decentralised and inchoate communities, accessible only to the hardcore. Battle.net kept fans together in one place, pulling Blizzard's various franchises under one banner with subsequent releases. Can Blizzard, with its experience of *World Of WarCraft*'s vast and intimate community, do the same again? Battle.net 2.0, as it is informally known, hopes to establish the pre-eminent online service for our always-connected age.

Battle.net's earlier triumphs have been somewhat overshadowed by the presence of *World Of WarCraft*'s 11.5 million users. But it too has hefty statistics: during its lifetime Battle.net has seen 12 million unique registrations. The servers are still busy today, despite Battle.net's last supported title appearing in 2003 – *WarCraft III*'s expansion, *The Frozen Throne*. Add up the numbers and it's clear that Blizzard deals with a multiplayer customer base in the same league as Xbox Live. And it says it's ready to up its game, matching the credentials of Microsoft's service in terms of matchmaking and community building.

Poised to relaunch with the release of *StarCraft II*, Battle.net also takes a lot of cues from the social networking successes of recent years, as well as scrutinising digital distributors like Steam and iTunes, and content-sharing systems of the kind seen in *LittleBigPlanet*.

Prior to joining Blizzard, Battle.net project director Greg Canessa worked at PopCap and Microsoft

"From Blizzard's perspective we wanted to take a step back and evaluate everything that's been done," says Blizzard's man at the prow, **Greg Canessa**, formerly VP of videogame platforms at PopCap and group manager for Xbox Live Arcade. "We wanted to sum up the market trends and ask ourselves, well, if we're going to build an online gaming service from the ground up, what are the types of things we'd like to do, and what are the types of things we'd want to enable the Blizzard community to do together? And from that we came up with the vision of the new Battle.net which really revolves around these three principles: being always connected, and that connected experience leading to persistence of character and so forth; the competitive arena for everyone, which is really about matchmaking and finding gamers of your skill level, so you can compete and build a reputation online; and the third key tenet was really this idea of connecting together the Blizzard community – and that's really where the social networking aspect comes in."

But above all else, Canessa is insistent on one thing: integration. This isn't a standalone program offering a generic, broad-brush service which

"Our vision is for millions of people to use the leagues and ladders system – that requires a level of design and complexity that is pretty daunting"

Blizzard's multiplayer games then piggyback – it is an umbrella technology for the bespoke, integral always-online aspect of each game. And it is this factor which Canessa sees as the major differentiator from platforms like Steam or Games For Windows Live.

"We're staying focused on creating a gaming service for *our* games," stresses Canessa. "Implicit in that is deep integration; the coolest online features are those that are built around specific games' features. We're not taking a platform approach. Xbox Live, PSN or Steam – they have to build a gaming service that hundreds of thousands of games can plug in to across multiple genres. They have to be able to support *Call Of Duty* and *Bejeweled* on one platform. We're not bound by that constraint here at Blizzard. We can provide custom online game experiences for our games,





It's now possible to chat across realms and indeed games. As Battle.net is integrated with *SCII*, we're interested to see how disruptive changing games will be to conversations

because we're not trying to build a platform, we're trying to build the best experience for *StarCraft II* or *Diablo III* or *World Of WarCraft*."

The approach Blizzard's taking isn't completely custom for every game, however, but a hybrid built of top-down technologies and bespoke experiences.

"Many aspects of Battle.net benefit from a collective community between the Blizzard games," Canessa says. "So there is a common set of features, both from a technology standpoint and a customer experience standpoint. Examples of that would be some of our social network community features, chatting across games, friends lists, presents, VOIP, profile systems and matchmaking services, common logins. We're migrating everyone in *World Of WarCraft* to Battle.net accounts, so all Blizzard games from this point on will be on one common user account system. But on the other hand you have custom experiences built into Battle.net as well. An example of that would be the ladder system that we're building that's very tailored to realtime strategy games and *StarCraft II* – essentially a competitive leagues and ladders service. You're matchmade into a game with someone of your skill level and you can either participate in a one-versus-one or start in a random team. Then after a number of determination rounds you get put into a league system, and slotted into a division within that league. You're competing against a hundred other people in your division for a placement over the course of season, and at the end of the season there will be tournaments and so forth."

It's a completely automatically generated league system that, in Canessa's words, "the masses can use". It is, as he is keen to point out, something that has not really existed in any comprehensive form: "There've been examples of very niche league systems that various games in the past have used – *WarCraft III*, for example. But few people used them, it's always fairly niche. We're trying to evolve this into something that anybody can participate in and play. Our vision is for millions of people to use the leagues and ladders system – that requires a level of design and complexity that is pretty daunting."

But how well will this sit with the existing fanbase for games like *StarCraft*? Blizzard's community of users is, taken as a whole, one that runs the gamut. There are *World Of WarCraft* players who may only be dimly aware of PC gaming outside of Azeroth – for them, an integrated, automated, centralised tournament system is likely the only way they'd ever encounter that sort of play. But then you have the super-hardcore – PC gamers who have long liked

to fiddle with command lines, customising their experiences through .ini files, organising their own tournaments, independently and ad-hoc. Consider the recent outcry after Activision announced that no player would be able to run dedicated servers for *Modern Warfare 2* – will such players care for an online competitive community over which Blizzard has such a controlling influence?

Blizzard has yet to reveal anything concrete regarding how the integrated leagues system of *StarCraft II* will affect the creation of custom leagues or structured ad-hoc tournaments outside of the company's centralised, automated system. Certainly, individual custom matches will be possible – and for an RTS you need little more than this facility, a whiteboard and a pen to set up a tournament, but Canessa assures us that greater things are afoot: "Blizzard Entertainment is committed to supporting eSports, so we have some solutions we're working on to support location-based tournaments through Battle.net. We do have some cool ideas and plans in place for custom leagues and tournaments, but we're not quite ready yet to go into details on how or when these features will be implemented. We can say that Battle.net will be a constantly evolving platform."

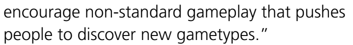
The announcement in July that *StarCraft II* would not include LAN support was greeted with little enthusiasm by the existing *StarCraft* playership. Regardless of their chagrin, however, it is a reflection of how Blizzard has embraced the step-change in the way all games are now played in the wake of the internet. Even many nominally singleplayer games, for DRM reasons and otherwise, are online all the time. With things like Xbox Live's Achievements, quickly mirrored by Steam and now adopted by Blizzard, even those singleplayer experiences form part of a larger online context, a multiplayer meta-game, in which your efforts are matched against those of your friends.

"All Blizzard games are connected games," says Canessa. "If you look at the history of the company, our games have been connected since the first game we did back in the early '90s, and Battle.net becomes that lynchpin that holds it altogether. I think that the games industry is moving towards a connected universe: all games will be connected in some form or fashion. Every game genre has different play patterns – the way that people interact varies – and some games are more conducive to realtime synchronous multiplayer, like a realtime strategy game, and other games are not conducive to this, like a puzzle game. They are predominantly singleplayer experiences. But even those games have connected states and there are benefits to connectivity – like they have social network features connecting you with your friends, leaderboards or achievements – there are meta-game features, for lack of a better term, that are common and can benefit all genres of games. So, as a high-level philosophy, I think we are moving to that sort of connectivity being common across all games, PC and console. That's the future. And the Battle.net service ties all that together."

"I think we are moving to this sort of connectivity being common across all games, PC and console. That's the future. And the Battle.net service ties all that together"

But does the rise of the meta-game change the kinds of experiences that developers can give to players? Does the motivation to chase achievements risk disrupting engagement with a fiction, for example? Canessa thinks not.

"I am slightly biased," he admits, "but I don't think that there are necessarily a lot of experiences out of there that would be hurt by connectivity. We have directed story-driven singleplayer experiences at Blizzard, but those are married with really cool fun multiplayer experiences or meta-game features that really add to it. Well-designed achievements can



encourage non-standard gameplay that pushes people to discover new gametypes."

We suggest a situation in which a poignant moment is interrupted by an achievement announcing the death of your girlfriend, an experience valued at ten points. Canessa laughs – and then quickly sidesteps the issue. "In a massively multiplayer context it is slightly different," he says. "It really depends on the game. Here at Blizzard we're really focused on finding the benefits of being always connected. I can give you the example of *StarCraft II*. We've poured a lot of time and attention into our singleplayer game, but whether or not you're playing the campaign, you're still connected to your friends, you're still able to chat with them, you're still able to co-ordinate, find out what they're doing, you're able to earn achievements, you're able to unlock rewards, you're able to have a persistent character that exists on Battle.net. So we're trying to find ways of connecting those experiences together even for those people who just want to play through a story. I don't think there's any downside or distraction from that."

We're not convinced. Surely, if connectivity is reshaping games, some genres will suffer. But this is little to the detriment of Blizzard, the games of which have rarely, despite Canessa's protestations, placed as much emphasis on the cloistered narrative experience as they have on mechanics and interaction with other players. Blizzard clearly has had its ear to the ground for some time. But despite identifying the rumblings of the online age, Battle.net is cautious about thrusting players into it.

The new identification system, called Real ID, superimposes itself on accounts tied to individual games and allows users to adjust their level of exposure to other players. Canessa explains: "It's an optional layer of relationships that we're placing on top of the character ID. How it works is this: when anyone first gets on to Battle.net they create a character, like you would in *World Of*

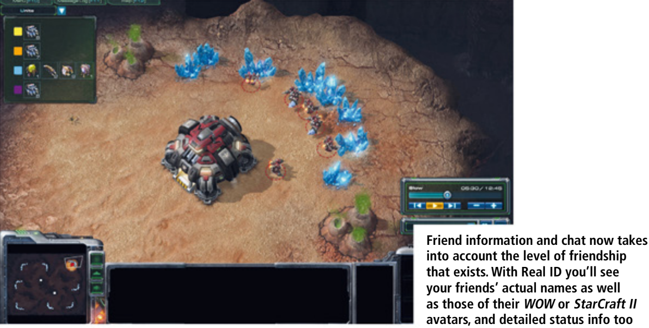


Taking its cue from Xbox Live and Steam, Battle.net rewards the player with achievements and unlockables like avatar images; each player's progress can be tracked through personal stat pages









Friend information and chat now takes into account the level of friendship that exists. With Real ID you'll see your friends' actual names as well as those of their *WOW* or *StarCraft II* avatars, and detailed status info too

WarCraft or any other online gaming service. That is your anonymous identity online. You can form friend relationships with other players at the character level, you can get online status information, you can chat with them and so forth. And if that's all you want to do, that's fine. Some people prefer to stay private and have that veil of anonymity. Some people are more comfortable forming relationships online when they are anonymous. There are other reasons – principally, you want to have character identities that are appropriate for each game. You also have issues with kids. Allowing them only to stay at the character ID level provides a more protected experience for some children.

"Real ID is an umbrella that bridges across them and provides that commonality, allowing you to have your cake and eat it too," Canessa continues. "With Real ID, you can form friend relationships with people you know in real life. It's more of a Facebook-style invitation to which friends have to mutually consent. And, if you do, you'll see each other with your real name and then your character name after that. You'll get some benefits from doing this – you'll be able to chat across games, you'll have that friends information that spans games. So regardless of whether you're on a different server, realm or playing a different faction or in another game, we can still chat. You'll get better status information – so you'll be able to tell specifically what I'm doing online: so, like, 'Greg Canessa is playing *StarCraft II*, campaign mode, mission eight, killing a Zerg'. There are other small benefits, too. It's all optional, but it provides a greater level of exposure and awareness for your real-life friends."

Real ID and the implementation of attendant features such as cross-game chat has proved to be a non-trivial task, says Canessa. "This is a very large undertaking," he says. "The vision behind Battle.net has existed in some form or fashion for quite some time now. Development has been ongoing for the last two years and has recently accelerated. But the Battle.net vision has continued to evolve; there are certain aspects that have been in development for some time – like the accounts system. Migrating *World Of WarCraft* accounts was the last stage in what has been a fairly long process."

Though he's reticent to talk actual figures, it's clear that a great deal of time, effort and money has been poured into Battle.net – it's a service that Blizzard hopes to last. Simply ensuring a parity of service in each of Blizzard's regions of commerce has been a colossal endeavour.

"Just in terms of server hardware it's a significant investment that we're making," says Canessa. No wonder then that Battle.net is such an open-ended endeavour – capable of being extended to exploit emergent opportunities down the line. We probe Canessa about Blizzard's stated interest in console development – could Battle.net potentially span platforms?

"We're looking at all sorts of options for the future of Battle.net," says Canessa carefully. "And though we don't have any plans that we can specifically talk about with regards to consoles or other devices, we are building Battle.net to be scalable and agnostic. I can tell you that. So the backend features that provide the meta-game and social features can be accessed from locations around the world and different devices, not specifically PC."

But let's not get ahead of ourselves and start speculating about potential uses of iPhone integration: Blizzard has got more than enough on its plate at launch. Already the master of one of the largest online communities on Earth, the company is in the process of consolidating the audiences of its various games, migrating them to a new tier of service for the always-online age. Blizzard hopes its integration with individual titles will bridge the gap between the hardcore and the casual masses, engaging them alike with social tools and community features, while Battle.net's structural agnosticism and modular philosophy allows it to extend itself and flex in keeping with the times. While most existing gaming networks are playing catch-up with the demands of their audiences, Blizzard is the only one to invest so significantly in what it anticipates to be the demands years down the line. Of all the companies out there, Blizzard, with its intimate community relationship, is well-placed to know what those demands might be, and that may just make the difference between being ahead of its time, and defining it.

Will mod for food

The free market now charges

A controversial feature to be added to Battle.net after launch is the marketplace. Not only a distribution destination for maps, scenarios and other add-ons for *StarCraft II*, the marketplace allows players to sell their own mods. Is this opening a massive can of worms? Canessa laughs.

"So marketplace is the 'oh shit!' feature we announced at BlizzCon," he says. "Content creators have always been an important part of Blizzard's overall business, as evidenced by Defense Of The Ancients [the hugely popular *WarCraft III* mod], so we wanted to create an environment where creators can participate in the ecosystem and get rewarded for their efforts. So we hope that by providing this mechanism to charge for content, and share that revenue with Blizzard, we can motivate the ecosystem and raise the bar in terms of quality of content."

User-generated content has historically proven to be a massive headache for companies when it comes to copyright infringement – and none of those companies have ever directly shared in revenue generated by the sale of potentially infringing content. We ask what Blizzard's plans are with regards to limiting its liability. "Marketplace isn't as far along in development as our shipping features for *StarCraft II*," says Canessa casually. "We don't have a lot of details to announce of how that is going to work. How we deal with infringing content, objectionable content – it's stuff we're thinking about. They'll all be worked out by the time we launch marketplace."

What about using the marketplace to sell games themselves down the line? Canessa is similarly coy: "I'll say this: our development philosophy of having common sets of features that extend across all our games – that applies to marketplace. We'll be extending marketplace to other games and opportunities as they arise."



ONLINE

Grand designs for Home

After the rise of Facebook apps, can PlayStation Home become the next break-out social gaming platform? UK developer Outso is betting on it

For a long while, Home did not appear to be where Sony's heart is. The much-hyped, much-delayed virtual social environment was originally billed as one of PS3's major USPs, but a year after the open beta launch it has rather fallen off the radar for many of the console's owners. Recently, head of Home development Peter Edward was misquoted as saying the service was not a priority for the company, and it was telling that no one seemed particularly surprised. Even Sony, which was understandably miffed by the misrepresentation, chose to address the issue via a quiet post on the Home forum.

But this is by no means a ghost town. There are regular events and game space openings, and at least one million PS3 users visit Home regularly (out of eight million or so PSN subscribers), tending to spend upwards of 40 minutes in any one visit – not an inconsiderable audience. Participants mostly come to chat, dance, bowl and buy virtual goods, but by the time you read this UK studio Outso will have launched the first chunk of *Sodium* into the environment. It may prove a vital test case for the future of Sony's digital utopia.

Operating somewhere between an MMOG and a straightforward arena-based tank shooter, Sodium is a major leap forward from Home's current interactive offerings



At Outso's Nottingham HQ, the company employs just 30 staff, with only ten working on *Sodium* at any one time. Home, then, represents an interesting opportunity for small studios

Operating somewhere between an MMOG and a straightforward arena-based tank shooter, *Sodium* is a major leap forward from Home's current interactive offerings. On entering the game, players arrive at a graphically rich social hub, which resembles a futuristic nightclub relocated to the Nevada desert. Indeed, the inspiration for the setting is Burning Man, the annual festival in which alternative-lifestyle junkies and '60s counter-culture burnouts gather to play trance music while dressed as Mad Max extras.

In *Sodium*, the focus is a futuristic extreme sport in which contestants pilot customisable battle tanks and fight waves of computer-controlled opponents in large arenas. The first section of the game, named Salt Shooter, takes place in a series of desert salt pans and features 50 stages. Outso is currently coding the second section, which will take the arena shoot 'em up action into space. That'll be available from the game's central social hub early next year. From here, Outso can add on as many new arenas as the market demands.

The financial model is currently 'pay to play' with freemium elements. Newcomers get to try out the first five Salt Shooter stages for free, but then must purchase a tank pilot outfit to open up the rest of the game. You start with a basic hover tank, but as you progress you earn in-game currency which can be used to purchase new weapons, such as guided missiles and railguns (these can also be bought with real cash at any time, which is where the freemium element comes in). Defence options are also available, and players can tweak their vehicles to their own style of play; the more armour and weapons you clamp on, the slower your tank moves. It's the familiar trade-off.



Whichever way you go with design, the handling is smooth and sharp, with the left analogue stick controlling movement, the right stick revolving the gun turret, and the triggers operating the weapons. It feels a little like a vehicle-bound FPS, and the key tactic is essentially strafing enemy craft as they flood in around you. Later levels have buildings to take out, and all end with boss craft that sport various weak spots. It's unapologetically retro in feel, borrowing from *R-Type* as well as early 3D tank/mech shooters like *Krazy Ivan* and *Steel Reign*.

The fact that you buy in via a virtual clothing purchase is important – Outso wants this game to feel like a natural extension of the Home experience, using the financial forms regular visitors are familiar with. And if anyone knows about creating content for Sony's service it's this

Newswire



Threewave goodbye?

So, farewell, then, Threewave Software, the inventor of capture the flag in an early *Quake* mod, Threewave CTF, and subsequent multiplayer specialist. Or have reports of its demise been greatly exaggerated? Rumours of the company's closure can be traced back to a Twitter post from Ubisoft Vancouver employee Josh Smillie: 'The Threewave Vancouver studio has shut down due to no new contracts. RIP CTF gods'.

Not so, says Threewave CEO Dan Irish (above), while refusing to put a number on any layoffs and saying: "We are trying to move forward in a manner that reflects today's realities." The sad reality seems to be that Threewave hasn't bagged any work since its decent stab at *Ghostbusters* multiplayer, and may survive in name only. We'll keep our fingers crossed it turns out otherwise, but if not then the studio leaves a very specific but huge legacy to multiplayer games, and one played countless thousands of times each day.

"It can be a bit of a culture shock after ten years of C and C++, but the language is very elegant and powerful," says Johnson. "The mix of Lua and the Home libraries allows for very rapid prototyping, and the lack of compilation is also a big plus; you can incrementally improve something in seconds instead of five to ten minutes. This makes for a very tight code, build and debug cycle.

"Garbage Collection [Lua's automatic memory management system] helps more than it hurts; tracking down memory related issues in C/C++ is a notorious chore in normal game development. The language is high level with good support for things like closures, co-routines and first class functions. This means less time is spent writing boring boiler plate code and more time spent on the fun stuff."

Home has similarities with the original PlayStation in terms of both the technical restrictions, and the more modest financial resources required to develop a product

This emphasis on rapid change and rewriting is very much built in to the game content. The use of a comparatively barren desert setting makes the environment easily modular, allowing designers to change things around if there are unforeseen problems, which would clearly be much more complicated with an elaborate city map.

As a development platform, Kemp feels Home has similarities with the original PlayStation in terms of both the technical restrictions, and the more modest financial resources required to develop a product. It's back to the days of small ten-to-30-person teams producing workable games in less than a year. There are other pertinent comparisons, too. In many ways, *Sodium* is structured similarly to those 'massively singleplayer' mobile games in which an essentially oneplayer experience is given a communal feel by the addition of a social hub and online score tables (see Digital Chocolate's *DChoc Café* series, for example). You play all 50 stages of the main game against the CPU, but there's a global scoreboard for each level, plus pilots get to meet, chat and compare scores in the hub.

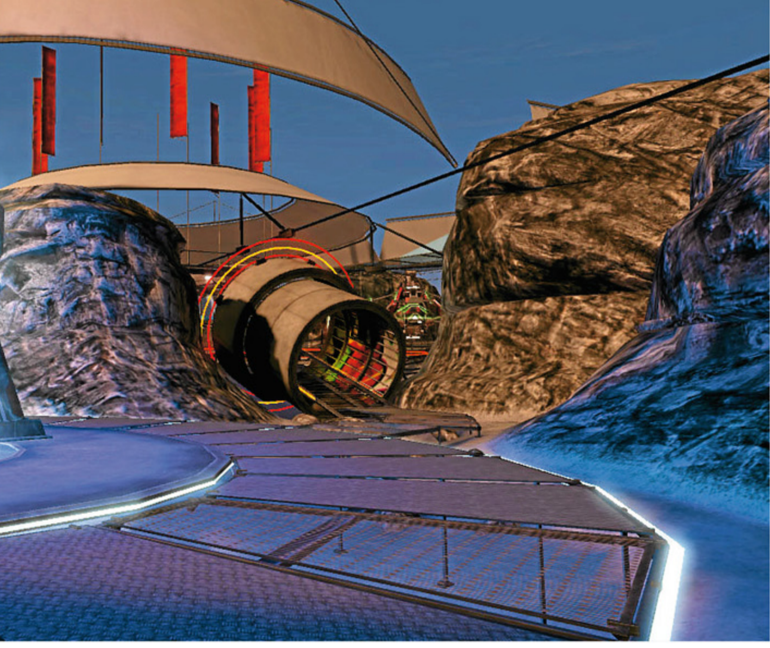
The team is also complimentary about the Home API, which apparently provides good support for interacting with the web and remote services, allowing the use of HTTP protocols and Secure HTTP protocols. In the hub, there are two huge screens showing Twitter feeds, the first being the game's own #sodiumone feed, the latter following the tag #sodium, which snares any talk about the game in the Twitterverse. There's also a rather interesting implementation of Facebook: Outso will be releasing an app for the social networking service allowing fans to see the latest global leaderboards and announcements, but players who register with the game's resident NPC, VICKIE, will get extra social functionality – as Kemp explains: "Once players have signed up they gain access to the *Sodium* website and will receive a free in-game gift. The user can then easily link their *Sodium* account to Facebook and gain access to leaderboards tailor-made for them and their friends. This will provide groups of users with an easy way to compare their high scores."

Eventually, Outso plans to add basic clan functionality, in which members combine their



***Sodium* is planned as a series of extreme sports challenges, which will be released on a regular basis over the coming year. The first event is Salt Shooter, a tank battle game set on desert salt pans. Outso is working on a second event now, which is to be set in space, but will retain the core shoot 'em up gameplay**







Sodium is the most ambitious Home project to date, but Outso's previous work can still be sampled on the service, which has benefited from the addition of a wide selection of attractions since the beta launched



scores and engage in tournaments with other teams. Actual PvP play – at least with a fast-paced shoot 'em up – is out of the question at the moment, but Outso is working on it. In the meantime, there are modest social activities to take part in. You'll find little minigames like running about stamping on scorpions to earn in-game points, which can be used to purchase virtual goods. In the VIP bar there's a cocktail-creating challenge named Desert Quench in which a range of ingredients must be combined to conjure up the correct beverage. Players can even set themselves up as bar staff to deliver these drinks to Desert Quench participants creating a *Diner Dash*-style experience.

There are also ambitions to introduce more complex co-operative quests and objectives, based around exploring the desert environments and locating hidden artefacts. Perhaps these will evolve into the main meat of the experience with the arcade games becoming a sort of luxury grinding activity, providing points and currency to use elsewhere. It all depends on the success of the game, and what users want. "Developing for Home is fun," says CEO **Halli Bjornsson**. "We can have constant iterations based on consumer feedback. There's a real energy to it. And you don't have that boom/bust element – it's not based around gambling on one hit, it's good for the industry. It's a good thing to grow an IP."

Importantly, *Sodium* hints at the development of an interesting new publishing model for potential MMOG developers. Launching a fresh massively multiplayer title into the retail space is a risky and cripplingly expensive venture – it's not just game development, it's building the entire back-end infrastructure and secure billing mechanisms, then growing a community. With Home, however, all that is in place and being managed by Sony. It's an incredibly cost-effective way to reach a relatively large customer base.

And Home games needn't stay on the platform. Kemp and Bjornsson talk about 'incubating projects' here, launching a title, gauging popularity, finding an audience, then perhaps moving on to release a full-scale retail product. Sony has a suite of tools allowing developers to make Home areas accessible in retail games, so the two experiences can co-exist. Bjornsson reckons the modest incomes possible on Home right now are actually a boon to creativity – it means the sector won't be swamped and controlled by the big publishers. Instead, Home game development might be where we see the next Jamdat, PopCap or Playfish spring up, offering completely new socially connected gaming forms. Whether or not Sony sees the service as a priority may, in the end, prove immaterial. It's what companies like Outso choose to do with it that's important.



WEBSITE OF THE MONTH

Get a load of this: 'If you spent your Thanksgiving Day being thankful for your family and friends while you ate turkey, you are not hungry enough! The true warriors were grinding online [on] Thanksgiving Day, letting the world know what they are thankful for'. They are thankful, as should we all be, for the humble fighting game.

Shoryuken might be the best website about fighting games in the world, and it certainly has the best forum. A word of warning: don't ask these chaps what 'frame advantage' means, or venture your opinion that "Zangief is best". It gets bloody. Stay in the shadows and there's more information here than you can handle on any aspect of every fighting game – as well as, for the more popular games, individual boards for characters that get right down to brass tacks. Lists of combos, videos demonstrating specific counters and techniques, as well as detailed analysis of every possible match-up they have, and what you should do about it. Our relationship with dear old Chunners has never been quite the same since.



INTERVIEW

Weighty issues

BioWare's CEO on why Mass Effect 2 could be the best game it's ever made

As BioWare reveals more about its sci-fi adventure sequel *Mass Effect 2* and Star Wars MMOG *The Old Republic*, we talk to the developer's general manager and CEO, **Ray Muzyka**, about storytelling, Natal, and working with the biggest licence in this or any other world.

You've said that *Mass Effect 2* is the best game BioWare has ever created. Why?

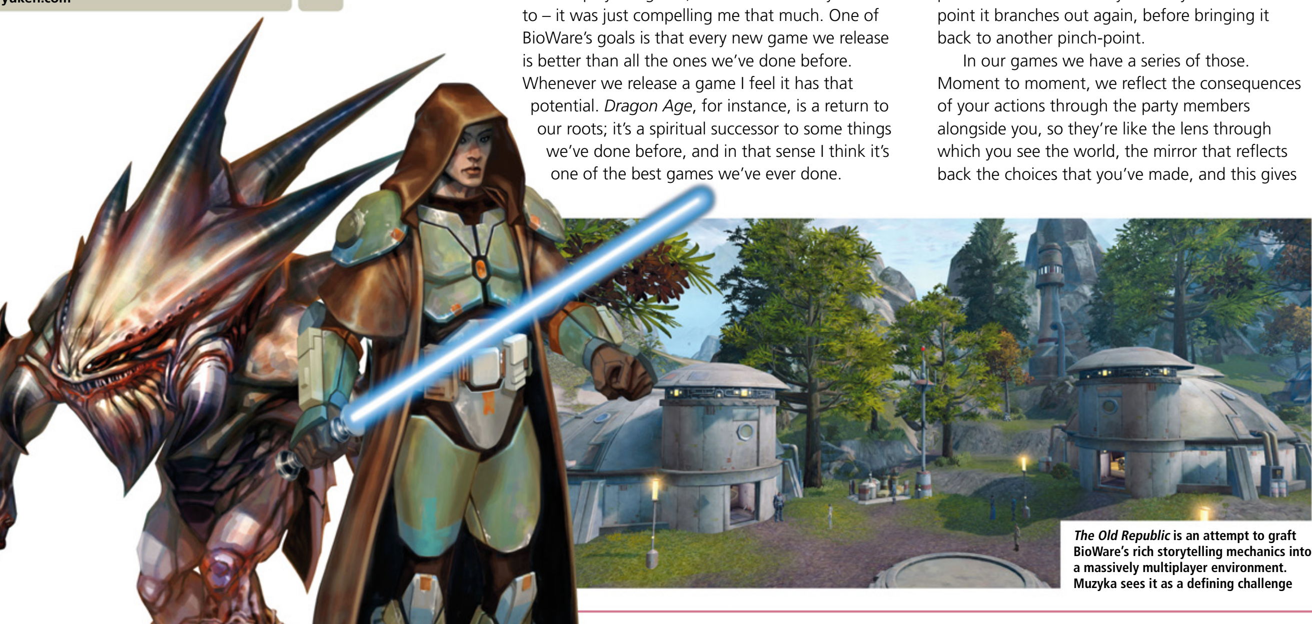
We really listened to the press and fan feedback on the first game and we've made a ton of improvements and technical innovations across the board, amped up the emotional intensity and brought everything together. I've been playing through a complete version of the game recently and I just couldn't think about anything else; I've got a stack of games that I want to play shortly, but I've had to put them off, not just because I need to play the game, but because I really wanted to – it was just compelling me that much. One of BioWare's goals is that every new game we release is better than all the ones we've done before. Whenever we release a game I feel it has that potential. *Dragon Age*, for instance, is a return to our roots; it's a spiritual successor to some things we've done before, and in that sense I think it's one of the best games we've ever done.

> **"We've reached the stage where we're improving incrementally. The technological leaps aren't so dramatic. It's as much about the imagination and artistry of the creators"**

How would you define BioWare's storytelling technique in comparison with, say, David Cage's rubber-banding?

There are many ways to tell a story; I like what *Heavy Rain* is doing, and I feel we're now able to explore new ways of storytelling that weren't available before. BioWare's technique can be described as a pinch-point storytelling; you have a certain flexibility as to what choices you can make and the consequences of those actions, and there comes a point where everything fits together, and that has to reflect what you've done up to that point so that it feels like your story. From that point it branches out again, before bringing it back to another pinch-point.

In our games we have a series of those. Moment to moment, we reflect the consequences of your actions through the party members alongside you, so they're like the lens through which you see the world, the mirror that reflects back the choices that you've made, and this gives



***The Old Republic* is an attempt to graft BioWare's rich storytelling mechanics into a massively multiplayer environment. Muzyka sees it as a defining challenge**

you the moral weight of the consequences. That's one way we use characters.

But, as I said, there are many ways to tell a story; often it's reflected in a social environment. We import players' accomplishments and allow people to compare their paths through, for example, *Dragon Age*. That's a story in itself. It's not the type of story you normally think about, but it's a social story, outside of the gamespace.

Is that the kind of storytelling you're aiming to achieve with *The Old Republic*?
Yes, but we're also incorporating the choice mechanics from our other games. They really put you in the game's space – they make you feel like you inhabit that world, like you're really interacting with other characters and making choices that have consequences, and you can be doing that with your friends. You can play it with real people, or with companion characters – they're a big part of the storytelling in *SWTOR* as well. But it's not easy. It's probably the most challenging game we've worked on, in terms of the amount of innovation involved, the amount of content and the sheer size of the game, it's crazy. To actually pull off a fully-voiced game with as much story as this, playable in both single- and multiplayer, is a huge challenge.

Is it harder to be as creative with a big licence like Star Wars than it is with your own IP in *Mass Effect*?
I like working with both. When starting on a new IP, working on the world takes a lot of time. There's a lot of stuff players never even see – all the background and design materials we use as a foundation to build the game upon. But working with a license you get to dip into all the different existing materials – comics, books, movies – you get to talk to the experts. You get a lot more research material.

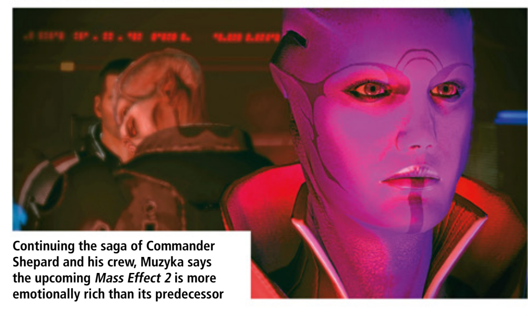
We view *Dragon Age* as a franchise as well – we intend to set more games within that universe, and expand it with downloadable content. It's good to have a portfolio with games that are different from one another. We like the fact that we make games that are distinct and fresh, and we want to keep it that way.

It's delightful to work in this industry. You never know what fans are going to want or expect from you a year from now, or five years from now, you never know what the technology is going to enable. It's really dynamic. I think that's one of the reasons why it's so much fun. We've reached the stage where we're improving incrementally. The technological leaps aren't so dramatic. It's as much about the imagination and artistry of the creators as anything now. I really like that.

How do you see advancements like Natal opening up new possibilities for BioWare?
We haven't announced that we're working on it, formally, but we have used it. I think it's very impressive. We would have to design a game from scratch that focussed on that system, its strengths and weaknesses; I don't think it would be something that would work well if you tried to slap it on, if you had to just stand up and pretend to point a gun for half an hour in a shooting sequence. But if you were to design a game from the start that took advantage of it, or the Sony motion system or the Wii, for that matter… Looking at the Wii, the best games that have been designed for that are social games like *Wii Sports*. You're interacting with family members, and the story there evolves from people playing together, not necessarily onscreen – as much between the players as from the game itself.







Continuing the saga of Commander Shepard and his crew, Muzyka says the upcoming *Mass Effect 2* is more emotionally rich than its predecessor



"An Historical Landscape: Venise"
The exclusive ***Assassin's Creed II* special edition book** gets off to what you might call a shaky start

"Yes, PC is the smallest percentage in terms of how much sold on each platform, but that hardly means anything other than the PC is just the smallest market."
Infinity Ward's community man **Robert Bowling**: GSOH, new 'creative strategist' title, enjoys making up stuff about the PC market. WLTM people who take him seriously

"Ancient Mayans have prophesized that on December 12, 2012, 1,000 people will play *Matt Hazard: Blood Bath And Beyond* simultaneously, thus unleashing an intense wave of kickassitude that could crack the earth itself in two."
The **Facebook page for *Matt Hazard*** shows just how much funny you get for no money

"The reality is that true Dante fans, people who actually have spent time with the literature and care about it, are over the moon with the game project."
Jonathan Knight, executive producer of *Dante's Inferno*, finds refined types who also enjoy a bit of the old hyper-violence

"Eight is beautiful."
Father of PlayStation **Ken Kutaragi** outlines his reason for upping the number of cores in PS3's Cell processor from six to eight

"Some of the female fighters' outfits are form-fitting and accentuate their breasts and buttocks; before battle, the camera occasionally zooms out from close-up views of flexed gluteus."
The **ESRB** has been thinking about Cammy's bottom a little too much

"As a player, you will go just like the main character in the same [sic]... you will be at first just like you and I and then he will become this bad ass main character"
Assassin's Creed II creative director **Patrice Desilets** rounds off the special edition's book as it began

INTERVIEW

Waging Total War

The Creative Assembly's PC-based series is one of the platform's most admired. We talk to its driving force

Having joined The Creative Assembly in 1996 as studio director, **Mike Simpson** went about establishing the *Total War* brand. Now, 13 years on, he's finishing up work on the series' sixth major release, *Napoleon: Total War*. We spoke to him about the challenge of keeping an established franchise from going stale.


Mike Simpson, The Creative Assembly's creative director

How difficult is it to keep your core audience happy but also iterate in a way that will bring new people to the series?
It's something we think about all the time – we don't want to lose that core audience. There are definitely things which make a *Total War* game that we're not going to lose: we're going to have a turn-based campaign and realtime battles, the scale's going to be epic, it's going to be reasonably historically accurate. Those are fundamental pillars, but within that there's freedom to vary the recipe. Pretty much every major release we do will have something quite different in it.



So it's important to actively try to court new players?
We make the game we want to play and just hope that other people like it. We don't try and second-guess too much what it is that would appeal to other people.

We do carry out a little bit of market research and focus testing with different groups such as casual RTS players. I guess when we're designing the game we're looking at ways to make the game appeal to those guys more.

And how do you go about achieving that?
Most of the effort to get to those guys is around trying to make the game more accessible, coming up with more understandable user interfaces. Trying to unfold the game gradually is important, too. *World Of WarCraft* is probably the best example – when you're fully featured it's horrendously complicated, you'll have 50 icons onscreen, but they give you the icons one at a time over a long period and you end up knowing exactly what each of them does. That's something that we can't do in exactly the same way because we're not that sort of game, but it's a principle that's worth trying to emulate.

In terms of historical accuracy, is it a challenge to find a balance between something that's authentic and something that's fun to play?
Normally it actually isn't. Historically, warfare is always perfectly balanced. The border's always in


Perhaps surprisingly, Simpson says that preserving historical accuracy isn't particularly hard to do when creating a *Total War* title. What's more complicated is trying to get that historical content to play out within simple game mechanics



the right place for the power of the two nations because if there was an imbalance they'd move. The difficulty with getting historical content into the games is actually making it simple. Designing something that's complicated and accurate is easy, but we try to fold complicated ideas into simple game mechanics which are easy to understand and feel right. Sometimes it works out well and sometimes it doesn't.

"Consoles can't do a Total War-style battle with 15,000 men. We could do something smaller scale, but then if you go too small scale it might not be Total War any more"

What made you choose Napoleon as the theme of the new game?

Napoleon was the obvious thing to put on the end of *Empire*. There were actually long debates about whether or not we should have included Napoleon at the end of *Empire* anyway – but we couldn't, basically. All we have control over is where the game starts. You could set up some conditions saying if France is in this position Napoleon gets born, but you're not going to get the Napoleonic wars.

***Empire* was criticised for being overly buggy on release – what caused that?**

We had a fixed release deadline, and being part of the publisher now, you can't not meet the deadline. As an independent developer you could be late – as long as you didn't run out of money! We don't get to do that any more. You have to say when you're going to release a long time before you really know for certain that you can do that. With *Empire* we bit off slightly more than we could digest and ended up with a game which was more buggy than it should have been.

How do you avoid that for future releases?

We always had this idea of doing evolution and revolution cycles between the different games, so every two games we'd completely throw the code base away and write it again. We're not going to do that cycle in the same way any more. We've got four areas – naval, land battles, campaign and multiplayer – and for each iteration we'll now pick out one of those and completely rewrite it, so over four products we've ended up rewriting the whole code base. That way we've got a more manageable task with three quarters of the game rock steady stable all the way through development.

Is there any consideration to looking towards console hardware with the series in the future?

It's an obvious thing for us to be thinking about doing, and we have been for a long time. The current generation of consoles can't do a *Total War*-style battle with 10,000 or 15,000 men, they're just not quite up to it. We could do something smaller scale, and we've talked about that from time to time, but then if you go too small scale it might not be *Total War* any more. I think there probably are solutions to that problem, but if we had one already cooking I wouldn't tell you about it!

Continue

Nintendo's DSi
So much more than it first appears, no?

Christmas reunions
Fourplayer *Mario Kart 64*, just like the old days

Christmas Lego
Who couldn't love a Santa Claus minifig?

Quit

Christmas retail
How did we ever survive before online shopping?

Christmas visits
Yes, thank you, what a *lovely* pair of gloves

Picking favourites
All over for another year. The bruises will heal soon

INCOMING

Medal Of Honor

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **EA**



After ten years, the series rotates out of WWII and into modern Afghanistan. The 'relatively unknown' Tier 1 Operator is the singleplayer star, with DICE handling the multiplayer component

Hellgate: Tokyo

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **HANBITSOFT**



Standing somewhere between H5N1 and Godzilla on Asia's most wanted scale, this territorial exclusive is the first in a ten-act series, Hellgate: Resurrection, based loosely on the original

Prince Of Persia: The Forgotten Sands

FORMAT: **TBA** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Soon to be remembered: Jordan Mechner's *The Sands Of Time* series, this May 2010 sequel promising 'fan-favourite elements' and 'new innovations'. Forgotten: 2008's unfortunate reboot

Guild Wars 2

FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **NCSOFT**



Tyria welcomes its five playable races: 'The noble and resilient Humans, the war-mongering Charr, the brilliant inventors the Asura, the shapeshifting norn and nature spirits the Sylvari'

Mirror's Edge

FORMAT: **IPHONE** PUBLISHER: **EA**



The not-quite-free running of the console versions gets whittled down even further, though to have it running on iPhone at all is something. Faith brings her full range of moves to 14 2D levels

Backbreaker

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **505 GAMES**



Remember this? Another year, another announcement for the still 'groundbreaking' gridiron game by NaturalMotion, creator of the Euphoria animation system. Now touching down in spring

Final Fight: Double Impact

FORMAT: **360, PS3** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**



Odd choice of name for this HD double-pack, half of which is actually fellow CPS coin-op *Magic Sword*. Don't get too excited about the HD aspect: it's just a *Super Eagle*-style upscaling filter

Silent Hunter 5

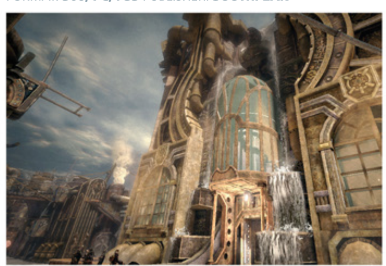
FORMAT: **PC** PUBLISHER: **UBISOFT**



Hardware anti-aliasing is just one of the delights in the latest footage, so don't expect a repeat of the last game's troubled launch. A new interface promises a sub 'free of confusion'

Edge Of Twilight

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3** PUBLISHER: **SOUTHPEAK**



A brush with eternal night for Aussie developer Fuzzyeyes: most of its staff have been laid off, the studio and its steampunk RPG banking on a partial buyout before work resumes in 2010



INTERNET GAME OF THE MONTH

Mountain Maniac

games.adultswim.com/mountain-maniac-twitchy-online-game.html

Games with the word 'Maniac' in the title, with one very notable exception, are rarely the most highly evolved of experiences, and PixelJam's latest Flash offering isn't about to change that. Essentially a redneck reinvention of *Peggle*, *Mountain Maniac* casts you as an extremely angry lumberjack raining a hi-score armageddon down on a village lurking below you, by means of pounding the ground with an enormous hammer to unleash boulders. Once they've been set in motion, you can then nudge the rocks left and right as they fall, with the aim of wiping out as much local wildlife, traffic, and eventually real estate, as possible.

It's mainly luck, of course, as you're generally firing your boulders into the abyss with no real idea of what lurks below you. The whole experience exhausts its charms fairly quickly, but ever since the days of *Rampage*, smashing things up has always been a dependable concept for videogames to return to, and *Mountain Maniac* is merely the latest in a long line of titles to embrace the limited pleasures of mindless destruction.



"...AS GOOD AS IT GETS" 10/10
EDGE
PlayStation Official Magazine - UK 9/10
EUROGAMER 9/10
XBOX 360 THE OFFICIAL XBOX MAGAZINE 9/10
BEING BAD NEVER FELT SO GOOD
BAYONETTA™
15
XBOX 360
XBOX LIVE
PS3
Developed by PLATINUMGAMES INC
SEGA®
www.sega.co.uk

Industry FOCUS

In association with Screen Digest

Sony's PSP Go strategy unpacked

Piers Harding-Rolls examines the revamped handheld



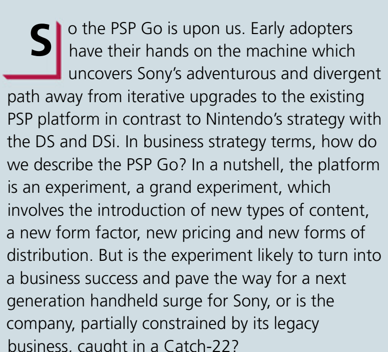




***Assassin's Creed: Bloodlines, Motorstorm: Arctic Edge* and *Gran Turismo* are all available as PSP Go downloads – to the potential chagrin of traditional retailers**

So the PSP Go is upon us. Early adopters have their hands on the machine which uncovers Sony's adventurous and divergent path away from iterative upgrades to the existing PSP platform in contrast to Nintendo's strategy with the DS and DSi. In business strategy terms, how do we describe the PSP Go? In a nutshell, the platform is an experiment, a grand experiment, which involves the introduction of new types of content, a new form factor, new pricing and new forms of distribution. But is the experiment likely to turn into a business success and pave the way for a next generation handheld surge for Sony, or is the company, partially constrained by its legacy business, caught in a Catch-22?

Let's first discuss the window of opportunity that I believe exists for Sony to take a significant step towards developing a strategic advantage in the handheld games console sector. PSP Go represents a pretty bold step in the handheld console space with regards to content – PSP Minis – and content distribution: physical media is out, while digital distribution is in. PSP Minis are, as we know, downloadable and playable by all PSPs, but their concept and more app-like execution go hand in hand with the launch of the PSP Go.

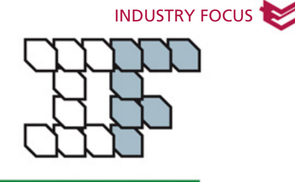


I believe that Sony's new handheld has a unique product proposition: it sits in the middle ground between Nintendo's DSi and Apple's iPod Touch/iPhone. In distribution, form factor and multimedia capabilities, it arguably has an advantage over the DSi, and in game input interface, firstparty content and graphical execution it has an advantage over the iPhone. This sets the PSP Go aside from the competition. However, I don't expect the handheld games market to stand still, which means that Sony only has a limited window of time before the advantage of pressing home its forward-thinking product development strategy is stripped away by new and enhanced products from its competitors.

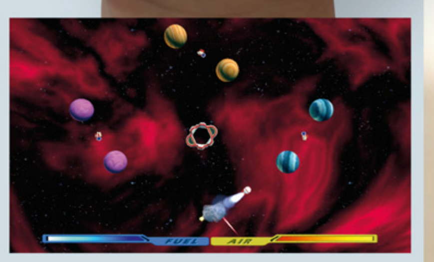
Screen Digest currently expects a next-generation Nintendo handheld to be introduced in 2011. Nintendo's developing strategy on non-games entertainment content and the evolution of its DSiWare distribution strategy suggests that the company's next handheld could be more aligned with, and directly competitive to, the PSP Go. In essence then, Sony has around two years in the market to generate something commercially meaningful around the PSP Go, to drive handheld users to PSN and build a community of consumers that have bought into the PSP Go

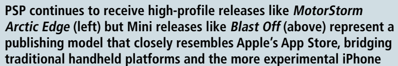












PSP continues to receive high-profile releases like *MotorStorm Arctic Edge* (left) but Mini releases like *Blast Off* (above) represent a publishing model that closely resembles Apple's App Store, bridging traditional handheld platforms and the more experimental iPhone

experience, which is likely to be built upon with the release of a PSP2. Within two years we could have a new Nintendo handheld and an iPhone with more advanced gaming-specific credentials that could compete with the handheld consoles. If Sony delivers within that timeframe, my belief is that it will be much more strongly positioned moving into the next generation of handheld consoles.

Sony only has a limited window of time before the advantage of its forward-thinking product development strategy is stripped away by new products from its competitors

So the question is: is Sony aiming to take full advantage of this opportunity, following the launch of the PSP Go, to defend or even enhance its future position in the handheld sector? The company's decision to position PSP Go as an incremental business opportunity to the existing PSP hardware suggests not. As such, the device pricing, the limited ability to put your existing physical media-based games on the new console and the limited marketing of the platform is reflected in the small amount of PSP Go handhelds that have been sold in the weeks since launch. At its current price-point the platform is only really viable to a limited proportion of early-adopter games enthusiasts that have to have their hands on the latest devices.

The current strategy very much reflects a 'toe in the water' approach to the experiment and, while more risk-free – the hardware makes money and retailers are kept reasonably happy – this cautious approach belies the important role I believe the PSP Go has in shaping Sony's future success in the handheld console business.

What's holding Sony back? There are certainly some financial constraints on this experiment and the macro-economic situation will have had an impact on the company's ability to be more commercially risky in its approach. This will have affected the pricing strategy and other elements such as marketing spend. Sony may also be partially hamstrung by its legacy business. It needs to maintain strong relationships with retailers to grow its PS3 business – developing a digital distribution-based handheld business that superseded the current PSP business may not have been viable as a result.

Sony, then, is in that difficult position of wanting to innovate but also having to maintain the status quo in its existing markets. Significantly, Apple doesn't have those constraints acting upon it, which is a formidable competitive advantage at this stage of the industry transition from a traditional games business driven by packaged products to a market driven by digital distribution and more experience-led games services.



SOMETHING ABOUT Japan

Why the home of Space Invaders is no longer king of the hill

Christophe Kagotani, **Edge**'s Tokyo correspondent, watches the local game industry struggle to keep up



Pity the poor Japanese gamer. Do you even notice us any more? We were the king of the hill for so long, at the centre of the modern videogame industry, and the games used to be designed for us. They were released here first, and then much later would find their way west (if ever). Those gorgeous little card boxes, rich colour manuals crammed with information about the games and all the bonus trinkets you could wish for, from plushies to soundtracks to special controllers. Today, we stand by the side of the western superhighway, cold and unamused, trying to thumb a ride.

Quite a change, no? Or perhaps you think it's an exaggeration. Let me clarify a few things first. The Japanese videogame has its roots in the arcade. The PC has always been a minor games platform over here, and because of this things like online play and even the whole FPS genre are still not familiar to every Japanese gamer – or developer.

But they're familiar to the western industry. PC hardware and software, and the experience of working with them for many years, prepared western developers for the generation of consoles we're now playing with. The hit games on these machines are developed in Europe or the US, often born of genres that were popularised on the PC, and the success of *Gears Of War*, *Halo* and *Modern Warfare* mean that mainstream videogame culture is now western videogame culture.

This is an era when the cost of developing a high-quality title is prohibitive, so when a game is going to be made in Japan, this cultural context has to be considered. In other words, the developer has to target the overseas market. Japanese gamers are hungry for new experiences, curious about these wildly popular genres that have little impact in their own country, and most definitely impressed by the incredible visuals promised by something like *Heavy Rain*. But this stuff comes with a big culture shock attached.

Did you ever curse the Japanese industry for 'OK' and 'cancel' being the wrong way around on its games in the early PlayStation years? The joke's on us now, because we're cancelling when we mean OK

I don't want to just say that certain things 'don't appeal' to the Japanese, but explain why with some specific examples. Often the very scenario of a game isn't understandable. Let's say that Brian, a Japanese guy, buys the new *COD* game. How can *Modern Warfare* resonate with this resident of a country in which very little is known, and nothing is shown, about the ongoing wars in Iraq or Afghanistan, and where gun culture in general is so marginalised? For western gamers the modern military and constant conflict are part of the furniture, on news reports and websites all around. To Brian it seems a bit like science-fiction.

But he perseveres – despite the highly complicated control scheme that seems to him like the developers are trying to pack a keyboard into the controller. And he's also wrestling with the perspective and the idea of a 360-degree environment. As usual, the Japanese publisher hasn't taken on the responsibility of producing a decent manual, and he's got a few thin black-and-white pages to 'help' with these challenges. Did you ever curse the Japanese industry for 'OK' and 'cancel' being the wrong way around on its games in the early PlayStation years? Well, the joke's on Brian now, because he's cancelling when he means OK. Oh, and when he finds a problem that needs a patch? Tough luck! There is no patch.

You could argue these problems are minor, but

that's telling: the Japanese market itself is now a minor place for business. When a game's out in Japan these days, it has usually been out in the US for quite some time and the developer is working on something else. This is why there are so few patches: fixes aren't worth spending time on if the game 'works' – ie, is not rendered unplayable by the fault – because it would just be for this tiny market. As for localisation, it is a big cost burden for a market where sales expectations are so low, and it's often done very poorly: our version of the infamous *Modern Warfare 2* airport level opens with the terrorists saying, "Shoot them – they're Russian," an obviously incorrect translation of the original's terse, "No Russian," referring to the language. So it is no surprise to see major titles with lots of text not being released at all, or if they are released then much later than in the west. I bought *Mass Effect* when it was released over here – six months ago.

And then there is the issue of the network. Poor old Brian wants to try playing online, but when he does so the other players berate him for either his poor English or his silence, and then mock his lack of skills and high latency. Now, there are dedicated Japanese servers for his Xbox 360, so the rest of the world isn't such a problem, but he's already spent 15 minutes looking for other players. One person on his friends list is online, playing a *Dynasty Warriors* game solo. Great. It's difficult to love high-spec, PC-born online gaming culture at the best of times, but when the infrastructure and players exist independently? Forget it.

Today, many Japanese gamers have adopted the PSP as their platform of choice, thanks almost entirely to the ad-hoc network culture that its many titles support. Tomorrow they may embrace a bigger online world but in the meantime the gaming market will move yet farther west. It used to be the case that success in Japan was seen as essential to the industry, and now that's simply not the case – companies arguably don't even need to think about the territory much any more. And so the situation for Japanese gamers won't improve any time soon. Just look at iTunes: enjoy your video store? We don't – there isn't one. And it's the same on Xbox 360, though SCEJ has just confirmed we're lucky enough to have one soon on PS3. Japan may once have been the home of technology but, as that announcement shows, now we're lagging behind. Players in the west enjoy a digital lifestyle that isn't only alien to us – these days, it's simply unavailable.





Famitsu (Enterbrain)
Japanese sales: October 19–November 22

Game/monthly sales/lifetime sales

1. ***Wii Fit Plus*** (Nintendo, Wii): 322,998 (894,260)
2. ***Pokémon Heart Gold & Soul Silver*** (Pokémon, DS): 313,210 (2,984,738)
3. ***Winning Eleven 2010*** (Konami, PS3): 304,191
4. ***Tomodachi Collection*** (Nintendo, DS): 292,608 (1,640,965)
5. ***Inazuma Eleven 2*** (Level-5, DS): 188,438 (634,362)
6. ***Bayonetta*** (Sega, PS3): 182,688
7. ***Tekken 6*** (BNG, PS3): 155,088
8. ***Final Fantasy Gaiden*** (Square Enix, DS): 171,487
9. ***Persona 3 Portable*** (Atlus, PSP): 170,068
10. ***J League Pro Sakatsuku 6*** (Sega, PSP): 112,975



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LG Watch Phone

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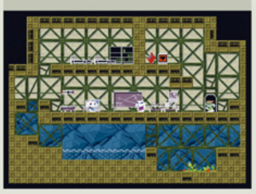
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Cave Story Wii



It might well have hit your little white box by the time you read this. A loving recreation of the original, which remains one of 2D and indie gaming's finest.
WII, NICALIS

BioShock 2



We just want to set lots of traps for Splicers, then stick a Little Sister in the middle and watch things kick off. If by some alchemy 2K Marin keeps Rapture's feel, that's a bonus.
360, PC, PS3, 2K MARIN

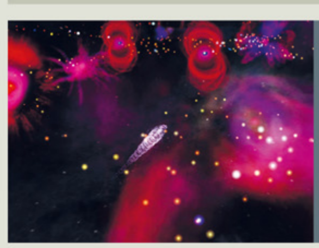
Red Dead Redemption



Waaall, it's like this, varmint. Them folks at Rockstar went and put a date on this, and gosh darn if we didn't all talk ornery-like for a day. Mostly 'bout shootin' one another.
360, PC, PS3, ROCKSTAR

Watch this space

Where are the space odysseys to offset the space marines?



When the technology rolled around that allowed developers to build cities in the open-world genre, they did. It's taken years for more abstract experiments like *Love* to emerge, and they remain on the margin

They once called space the final frontier. But we've been playing around there since the very first videogame, and several titles previewed in this month's Hype choose the stars for their setting. As a videogame setting, outer space drifts in and out of fashion, usually in step with technology, and rarely throws up any surprises.

Which is surprising. 1962's *Spacewar!* was set there because space is mostly nothing. Put a few white dots on a black screen and you have an instantly evocative setting. There are games that, on similar principles, conjured a universe of abstract beauty from technical limitations: *Elite*'s unfilled lines and stark, empty views were fuel for the imagination of many a young man. Yet more games appreciated the 'easy' bit of the equation, which saw arcades in the early '80s jammed with clones of *Space Invaders* and *Defender*.

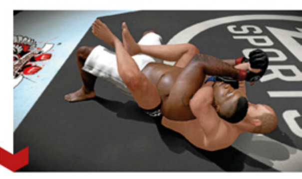
As visuals improved, space became even less interesting. Because in videogames 'space' always means 'mainstream science-fiction' – humans with elongated foreheads and blue puppets. In the movie Solaris, the despondent, half-mad and totally drunk Russian scientist Dr Snaut pins human endeavour to the wall as an essentially inward-looking, selfish thing: "We have no ambition to conquer any cosmos. We just want to extend Earth up to the cosmos's borders. We don't want any more worlds. Only a mirror to see our own in." This applies just as neatly to the failings of science-fiction.

In this issue we look at BioWare's follow-up to *Mass Effect*, as well as *The Old Republic*. The latter can't go beyond its IP, already a well-ploughed furrow, but we're genuinely looking forward to *ME*'s attempt to broaden its universe.

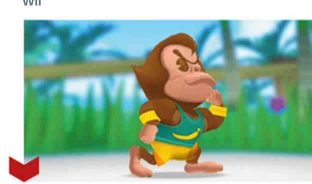
You can do anything in space – that's the point, surely, of setting a game there. But remember the disappointment of taking to the bridge of your own space cruiser in *Mass Effect* and then having to choose a brown dot on the map and just arrive there? Videogames have been dealing with space for nearly 50 years now, but, bold experiments such as *Eve Online* apart, the setting's innate possibilities remain under-explored. Regardless of how many star-spangled backgrounds are conjured up, it seems that gaming's feet of clay are much more comfortable on terra firma.











FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **TBA**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E196, E204**

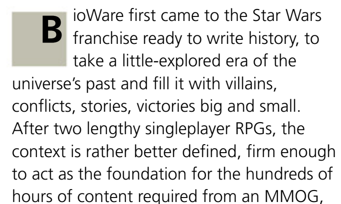
Star Wars: The Old Republic

Finally, a battle between good and evil that won't end in a TIE





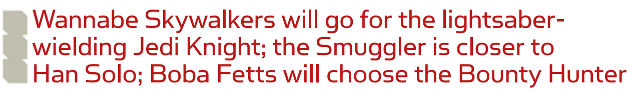




BioWare first came to the Star Wars franchise ready to write history, to take a little-explored era of the universe's past and fill it with villains, conflicts, stories, victories big and small. After two lengthy singleplayer RPGs, the context is rather better defined, firm enough to act as the foundation for the hundreds of hours of content required from an MMOG,



Lightsaber dual-wielding will be a dream come true for some, but not if everybody can do it. The flexible class and skill system is commendable, but players will have to work hard to stand out from the vast Jedi/Sith crowd



Wannabe Skywalkers will go for the lightsaber-wielding Jedi Knight; the Smuggler is closer to Han Solo; Boba Fetts will choose the Bounty Hunter

but *Star Wars: The Old Republic* feels different from the average online RPG. The core tenets of BioWare's singleplayer games – cinematic presentation, choice-based storytelling and rounded, believable support characters – are as central to *SWTOR*'s philosophy as the rhythmic, comforting ebb and flow of experience points, loot and skills.

It also veers away from MMOG convention in its character classes, which subvert the traditional archetypes of healer, mage, tank or scout. *SWTOR* wants to make you feel like a Star Wars hero, not a member of a party; it's playable solo, and AI companions will step in to compensate for the weaknesses of whichever class you choose. Wannabe Skywalkers will go for the lightsaber-wielding Jedi Knight; the Smuggler is closer to Han Solo; Boba Fetts will choose the Bounty Hunter. There are roughly equivalent roles on each side of the Force. The newly unveiled Jedi Consular, a Yoda-like class with equal emphasis on lightsaber combat and Force power, is twinned with a Palpatine-alike, the Inquisitor, on the Sith side.

There's a dramatic amount of variation within classes. Using the example of the Smuggler, BioWare guided us through three or four paths of character development; every couple of levels brings with it a specialisation path. Smugglers, for instance, can specialise early on as Gunslingers with dual-wielding and coercion abilities, or Scoundrels with stealth and healing aptitude. Class choice affects the story arc far more than the actual gameplay; it reflects who you want to be within *The Old Republic*'s universe, not what you wish to do.

The Sith Inquisitor class was the focus of our demonstration. Early on in the game, the Inquisitor is joined by two companions that complement his skills: Kham Val, who specialises in close-range combat, and Xalek, a Sith knight we're encouraged to treat as

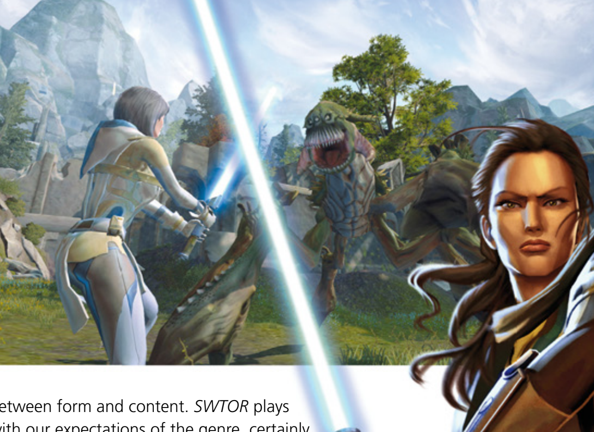


Only the barest of BioWare visual twists have been added to stormtroopers, Jedi knights, weaponry and vehicles



Force-push and Force-pull were two of ten or so skills on show, all of them balanced for solo play. Outside of self-heals and straight aggression, it will be interesting to see how Force powers are applied as party-supporting skills

Having companion characters for each class is all very well, but how is the game going to deal with thousands at once?



our Darth Maul. As in *Mass Effect* and *Dragon Age*, the companions act as a foil for your moral decisions, sounding boards to bounce off during conversations. We're unaccustomed to seeing developed supporting characters in MMOGs, especially fully voiced and animated ones – over the course of hundreds of hours, there's ample time for them to develop into much more rounded, fleshed-out characters.

Combat is almost jarringly fluid. Deep down, it's still a matter of mouse clicks and dice rolls, but it looks like so much more. Our character swats away bright slivers of blaster fire with her lightsaber, dodges and pirouettes and moves for all the world like she's choreographed. Even when we beat a retreat from a horde of violent raiders to see how they'll react, she still reaches over her shoulder with the blade to deflect their pursuing shots. Only the tiny red floating numbers dispelled from enemies with every swipe and the unobtrusive skill-bar at the bottom of the screen would alert an onlooker that this is an MMOG.

Our demo mission sees us sent into a Sith tomb to retrieve an artefact at the bidding of a rather bitter archaeologist. His voice-acting and animation are rather good – gone are the days, it would seem, of exclamation points above quest-givers and three lines of expository text. The conversation wheel is reminiscent of *Mass Effect*'s, offering us the usual polite, sceptical or surly responses, but there's room for nuance here.

When we embark upon the quest itself, things start to feel rather more familiar. Enemies stand in their places, waiting to be engaged, refusing to pay any attention to us at all until we step within six metres of them. It transpires that we have to kill a certain number of them in order to operate a machine deep in the tomb's depths, which spits out an item for us to take back to the quest-giver with depressingly little fanfare. In stark contrast to the setup, which already showcases a standard of digital acting that only few games outside BioWare's best can match, the actual mission consisted of a basic fetch quest; you expect to be rewarded, perhaps, with a beautiful cutscene, but in the end, like in any MMOG, it's just one of hundreds of similar tasks.

There's an interesting tension here between form and content. *SWTOR* plays with our expectations of the genre, certainly, but a successful MMOG is not just a singleplayer game stretched over many more hours. There needs to be satisfying interaction between players themselves, a busy economy of crafting and trading as well as unique roles for people to take up in parties. It's possible that the lack of definition in character classes and focus on soloing will undermine players who want to inhabit this world rather than just experience it. It is undoubtedly a beautiful world, though, and meticulously constructed. It's got more than enough to draw people in, and it will be interesting to see what BioWare does to keep them there.



The enemies we saw were either common fauna or rogue mercenaries – we're keen to see how battles with more powerful characters will play out, given BioWare's talent for hiding stats in elaborate flashing lightsaber battles

Feeling the Force

Typically, we ended up playing as Sith because evil is far more seductive than good, and had some fun playing with the dark Force powers. In addition to the usual Force push and arbitrarily evil bolt of lightning, there was an area attack that turned everyone purple and sent them flying, and a mean stun power that rendered enemies helpless. All of them were nestled in the skill bar at the bottom of the screen, their usage restricted by the usual cooldown times and mana costs. We're holding out for the Darth Vader choke hold, of course.

FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **BIOWARE**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **JANUARY 29**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204**

Mass Effect 2

A new storyline, and a refined, more convincing way of telling it

Though both *The Old Republic* and *Mass Effect* are set in galaxies far, far away, BioWare is dabbling in two very different science-fiction universes. Star Wars is all bright colours, whirling lightsabers and broadly drawn lines between good and evil, a platform for great deeds and dramatic space heroism. *Mass Effect*, meanwhile, spends almost as much time in grotty cantinas, seedy clubs and shining cities comprised of towering space-skyscrapers as it does in spaceships and on desert planets. The sequel is rather darker, but not pretentiously so; the storyline is underpinned by an omnipresent sense of threat and tinged ever so slightly with gruesome horror. It's closer to Farscape than anything else in TV sci-fi, and not just because of the amiable and mysterious blue lady-aliens.

The new threat to human life in the galaxy, the Collectors, embody both *Mass Effect 2*'s more ominous attitude and its exemplary alien design. These savage-looking insectoids, tangles of angular limbs and glowing eyes, are responsible for the human disappearances that form the backdrop of the plot. They land on inhabited planets in large ships, send swarms of paralysing insects out to disable unfortunate colonists and drag them away to perform grisly experiments upon them. The resulting enemies – nasty, lumpen, half-human – are rather more disturbing than the Geth, although they, too, make frequent reappearances, Shepard seeming to spend as much time blowing hapless robots to pieces as he ever did.



The Collectors land on inhabited planets, send swarms of paralysing insects out to disable unfortunate colonists and drag them away to perform grisly experiments upon them

The new level of *Mass Effect* on display starts us off outside a nightclub in a vast city. The architecture, streams of flying traffic overhead and clusters of conversing aliens are all familiar; we still can't interact with any unsignposted characters, and they're still oddly static. The dynamic lighting and textures, though, are noticeably improved, and there's a touch of stylistic grain to them. A shaft of light illuminates Shepard's rather gaunt face; we can see distant planets and stars in the night sky.

The setting is all very Blade Runner, especially the bar itself, which is illuminated in flickering red and populated by dancing aliens and secretive patrons drinking in corners. We guide Shephard to a room overlooking the club, into conversation with the bar's owner. She regards him with calm suspicion – the quality of the digital acting in *Mass Effect 2* is not only a marked improvement, it's BioWare's most convincing yet. The bar owner advises Shepard against causing any trouble, and the camera follows her gaze out over the club. The view is no longer static during conversations, panning and zooming instead to add a cinematic touch.

We're prohibited from selecting any of the options on the left-hand side of the dialogue wheel for fear that we'll discover important plot details – the scene ends when the barman hands Shepard a spiked drink, and we're deposited in a brief combat section that shows off the improved gunplay. Ducking into, out of and over cover looks and feels far more natural – we're told that each character has hundreds of cover animations – and a press of a shoulder button pauses the action and brings up a radial weapon-selection menu for all party members. It's difficult to tell in such a short time whether Shepard's squadmates are



***Mass Effect*'s Geth robots are strangely adorable, in contrast to the horrible half-human zombie things the Collectors send after Shepard. The Collectors all answer to a central hive mind capable of taking control of individual aliens, so an ordinary opponent might turn into an unstoppable-rage machine mid-battle**



Garrus is not the only returning character – either Ashley or Kaiden will be back, too, as will Liara, though seeing her again may be awkward after we refused her advances. Shepard's facial detail and animation has been improved, even if he seems to be wearing too much eye makeup



During combat, your colleagues drop into cover much more convincingly now, and are far less likely to spend two minutes stuck inexplicably behind a crate, peeking over



less suicidal this time around, or whether enemies are much more intelligent – thanks to the addition of heavy weapons, we manage to dispatch them with a grenade launcher before they get a chance to test our reflexes too much.

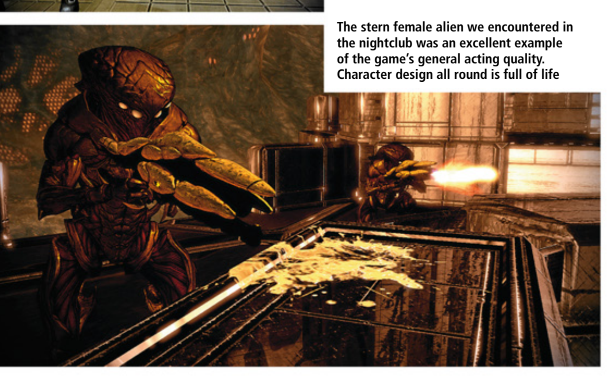
As BioWare continually emphasises, a lot of attention has been paid to retuning *Mass Effect*'s gunplay so that it appeals to shooter-oriented players, but that's not the only area of the game that needed significant improvement: uncharted worlds are now much more enticing. Rather than being sent to the far corners of the universe on missions and tantalised with a galaxy of planets that can't be landed on, exploring is now a valid and rewarding activity and might take Shepard and his squadmates to somewhere distantly familiar, opening up new backstory missions for support characters. The game's ending is dependant upon how much of your characters' history you manage to uncover – they, more than Shepard himself, are windows into the more personal side of *Mass Effect*'s storytelling.

The technical quality of the world comes across strongly even on limited first impressions, with excellent digital acting and architecture, and weirdly believable alien design. BioWare has clearly mastered its technical tools, dispensing with the texture pop-in and lengthy loading that scuffed some of the sheen from the original game, and it's clear even from such a short time in its company that *Mass Effect 2* is much more assured as a thirdperson shooter. Importantly, its brand of science-fiction stands up to closer scrutiny than most examples in gaming, which should ensure it a keen audience.



Supporting cast

Subject Zero, a recently unveiled new character, is a biomechanical android covered in tattoos that commemorate her favourite kills. She's considerably more interesting than the Krogan Grunt, at least, though they share a chief characteristic in their fondness for killing things. She's being billed a little too self-consciously as an uncontrollable rebel with a mysterious past. Garrus, the unscrupulous sniper from the first *Mass Effect*, also makes a brief appearance in the demo, turning up to blow the heads off some Geth. It's good to see a few familiar alien faces, since *Mass Effect* did a decent job of making us care about some of its support characters.



The stern female alien we encountered in the nightclub was an excellent example of the game's general acting quality. Character design all round is full of life

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **DICE**
ORIGIN: **SWEDEN**
RELEASE: **MARCH 5**

Battlefield: Bad Company 2

B Company is back with new priorities and an even greater appetite for destruction

Battlefield: Bad Company 2 feels, in some ways, like a step back towards DICE's roots. It still stars the same cursing group of miscreants from last year's console exclusive, but the tone is a little more serious and the refocused multiplayer is comfortingly old-school. Vehicles have a sense of fragility as well as raw power and are packed tightly into small areas, and death is frequent, sudden and wonderfully instant. Gold Rush, *Bad Company*'s trademark multiplayer mode, has become simply Rush, dropping the pretence of protecting chests of treasure and charging players with planting explosives at enemy positions instead.

The five loadout kits in multiplayer have been streamlined to four too, removing the Specialist option and spreading its weapons across two of the other classes. It's still fast-paced twitch shooting, never taking you out of the action for longer than about seven seconds when you fall victim to a sniper bullet or turn a corner into a faceful of machine-gun fire. Having funneled press attention towards the singleplayer for the original *Bad Company*, DICE is keen to show that the sequel lives up to the series' reputation for brutally quick, riotous multiplayer gaming.

The story revolves, once again, around a brewing global conflict with the Russians (why are we always fighting Russians in videogames, we wonder? "Because they have cool weapons?" offers *Bad Company*'s producer). The B Company characters are marginally more mature cannon fodder than they were, with better animation and intelligence, but haven't lost their personality. DICE is using the same writers and voice talent as before to keep a sense of consistency.

> It's possible to see almost from one end of the sprawling map to the other, your vision limited by swirling sand rather than the game's inability to render far-off structures

The game takes place primarily on the American Pacific coast, from Alaska down to Chile, a setting that proffers an immense variety of environments from frozen Andean mountaintops to verdant, sprawling, *Crysis*-esque Bolivian jungles. We're shown a snatch of gameplay from the latter, where the improved Frostbite engine really gets a chance to flex its muscles. Gunfire tears apart trees and wooden huts as soldiers fling themselves from collapsing buildings. The detail is quite beautiful, too: rainbows form in the mist, birds circle overhead, and scripted weather adds a touch of pathetic fallacy to a dramatic firefight in the driving rain.

Bad Company 2 features near total destructibility, which creates absolute chaos both in single- and multiplayer. Entire buildings, rather than just wall sections, can now be reduced to piles of rubble. In a second demonstration set in the snowy Andes, we see helicopter fire and rocket



Something old, something new

Kit customisation is new to the *Bad Company* series, though it seems to be limited to adding different sights to weapons rather than actual custom kits. A steady flow of experience points encourages you to keep racking up kills and completing objectives across *Bad Company 2*'s four multiplayer modes, contributing to a persistent online rank. Rush and Conquest are familiar from last year, but the remaining two modes are being kept under wraps – all we're allowed to know is that they're squad-based. The dogtag system makes a welcome return, too – dispatch a foe with a knife or melee attack and you can steal their ID chains for extra humiliation.



Tanks no longer come with a guaranteed killstreak. They're hard to control and easier to blow up than they were in the first *Bad Company*, especially susceptible to engineers' technology











Plainly, these aren't in-game shots, but *BBC2*, as we can't help calling it, does look good. The draw distance, especially, is excellent



launchers annihilate a village, punching holes through the roof of a warehouse until the entire structure collapses. There are limits, naturally, but only a few – the game won't let you destroy an essential building or bridge and trap yourself at the wrong end of a level, ruing your own destructive curiosity. The game's physics push the engine to its limits – even bullet movement is calculated in realtime rather than on a predetermined trajectory. Bullet drop makes sniping a real skill in *Battlefield*, and the game's huge draw distance makes it a very useful one.

In Africa Harbour, the arid South American desert featured in the beta, it's possible to see almost from one end of the sprawling map to the other, your vision limited by swirling eddies of sand rather than the game's inability to render far-off structures. The singleplayer levels, like the multiplayer maps, are fairly open, but you're still guided through scripted events, giving the developer a measure of control over the experience. It attempts to provide a natural guiding hand, putting you in the passenger seat of vehicles for dramatic sections rather than letting you drive the wrong way and ruin a set-piece.

There won't be any level-creation tools available for PC players at launch, but *Battlefield*'s return to its home platform is being handled with utmost care. DICE is aiming to provide mod tools at some point post-launch and optimise the controls for mouse and keyboard. Still, it's difficult to refute that this is a console-focused title. Compared to, say, *Battlefield 2*, the multiplayer is stripped down to the bone, limited to four weapon kits, four classes and a modest 24 players in comparison with *BF2142*'s 64 – ambitious enough on PlayStation 3, the chosen platform for the first open beta, but hardly on a par with its PC-centric predecessors.

For some, multiplayer will always be at the heart of *Battlefield*, and DICE is aware that talking too much about the singleplayer in *Bad Company* suggested priorities had changed. The developer now gives the impression of a more even focus. It's not enormously forward-thinking – its innovations are technical rather than conceptual – but it builds on all of *Bad Company*'s strengths while reaching a little farther back into the series' history for additional inspiration.





As before, the B Company boys' enthusiastic swearing and whispered quips add personality to proceedings beyond the usual babble about neutralising tangos and launching UAVs



Often there are so many scraps of building flying around during a hectic firefight that it's tricky to see what you're doing, or whether the wall you're behind is about to collapse

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA BLACK BOX**
ORIGIN: **CANADA**
RELEASE: **TBA**

Skate 3

The series learns some new tricks as a whole new city beckons

The *Skate* series has established itself as the likeable alternative face of the skating genre, defined by its lightheartedness, creativity and uniquely precise and rewarding control system, but that's only the superficial side of its appeal. What's come to define *Skate* in the eyes of real devotees is the community, the video-sharing and score-chasing, the hundreds of incredible online videos of people flying head-over-heels from their skateboards and landing, after a full flip, on a park bench or face-down on top of a passing granny.

It's this aspect that EA's Black Box studio has chosen to concentrate on for the next full sequel. *Skate 3* is structured around forming a skating crew, either from friends online or NPCs in singleplayer, and building up a brand and a reputation. You can play through in co-op, contributing to each other's success, and the competitive modes have been expanded for varied and inventive team-play. There's also an improved set of community features: video sharing is already well-established, but now there's the added opportunity to create and share skate parks and spread your brand logo across the internet.

Your character, having survived two games' worth of rad tricks and wince-worthy wipeouts, is now a superstar rather than a lowly skater trying to stick it to the man through unauthorised grinding on public railings, and that's reflected in a change of setting from the predominantly grey and decidedly anti-skater city of San Vanelona to a brightly coloured urban anarchist's paradise, Port Carverton. As your brand's reputation grows, you'll start seeing your name and logo on billboards across the city.

Skate 3 has a welcoming, unselfconscious feel, mercifully free of the painfully x-treme attitude that plagues other games in the genre; it's all about the skating, and the series' iconic FlickIt dual-analogue control system remains at the centre of the experience. Black Box is tweaking the control system at both ends of the spectrum, adding a skate school for novices and an even more precise option for high-end players.

We were shown three separate team-based games, each set in the same district of Port Carverton. In Domination, two teams of three compete for real estate; scoring the most points in a particular spot claims it for your team. The tension lies in deciding whether to stay in one place and try to set a massively high score or run between areas trying to own as many as possible. 1-Up, meanwhile, gives you 20 seconds to hit as high a score as possible between all team members, ending the round as soon as anyone fluffs a trick. Death Race is straight out of *Skate 2*, a hellishly fast-paced ride down a twisting mountain path.

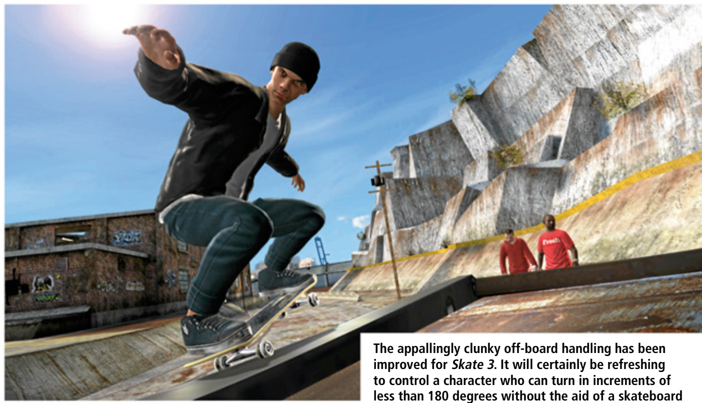
All of the multiplayer games are designed to take advantage of that spiderweb-thin thread between huge success and massive, embarrassing failure that drives you to push for the most difficult tricks or try your luck with an extra combo rather than land safe. Black Box clearly has a deep understanding of its game's appeal, and the expansion of the community features suggests an understanding of its audience's needs, too. *Ride*'s failure (see p88) clearly won't hurt *Skate 3*'s fortunes, either.



Making faces

The distinctive character creator makes a return for *Skate 3*, and it's as capable of churning out hilarious monstrosities as ever. Your old skater from *Skate* or *Skate 2* can be imported into the game, and if you recruit friends into your crew you'll see their avatars rolling happily around in your city even when you're not playing online. The characters themselves still have that strange malformed woodenness to them, but when they're being thrown around the city like crash-test mannequins in elaborate bailouts it seems rather appropriate.





The appallingly clunky off-board handling has been improved for *Skate 3*. It will certainly be refreshing to control a character who can turn in increments of less than 180 degrees without the aid of a skateboard



Despite the developer's promise of improved accessibility, *Skate*'s iconic control system won't be compromised, so getting enough air to pull off all but the most basic tricks is still a challenge





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It's not yet clear how analogue control will work; mapping moves across the three different stances is presumably more challenging than controlling two arms in *Fight Night*. Achieving the necessary fluidity will be crucial

EA Sports MMA

EA throws down a challenge to Yuke's with its first take on mixed martial arts

FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **EA TIBURON**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **2010**

Mixed martial arts is one of the few sports for which EA is not in possession of an official licence – THQ has that particular honour, as exemplified in *UFC 2009 Undisputed* earlier this year – but that hasn't dampened the publisher's enthusiasm for hunting down the likenesses and support of real-life talent, nor the attention to detail in their implementation. EA has been boasting the support of big names like Fedor Emelianenko and Randy Couture for months, and the confirmed roster now encompasses 17 fighters, with nearly 40 more rumoured.

Despite the name-dropping, though, the key tenet of *EA Sports MMA*'s inclusion policy is quality over quantity; there's no point in having a vast roster of stars to fight with if they all conform to no more than three or four basic templates, and EA Tiburon is of the firm belief that every fighter should look, move and fight like himself, individually designed and mo-capped. So, when two men are on the floor elbowing each other in the face, it won't always look the same.

The game is built on a modified version of the *Fight Night 4* engine, which is evident in the sense of weight and connection in the combat – when elbow meets temple or knee meets face, it looks like it really hurts. Fighters react dynamically to each other, reaching out to swat away a tentative punch, raising their arms preemptively when they step into close proximity. The demonstration fight between Emelianenko and Strikeforce's Brett Rogers highlights the combatants' individuality: Rogers' movement is assured, weighty, while Fedor's agile movement and defensive, flighty stance contrast starkly.

The tech-sharing extends to control, too, which can be mapped to either buttons or sticks. It's context-sensitive, adapting to standup, clinch and ground combat with appropriate moves. Like *Fight Night*, it's intended to be easy to get to grips with and satisfying to control; even when you have little to no idea what you're doing, it's fun to watch an intimidatingly burly man respond to your desperate stick-twiddling with convincing and surprisingly swift punches and grapples. Once you know what you're doing, *EA Sports MMA* promises nuanced and tactical fighting, forcing the player to adapt strategies to opponents' weaknesses.

At heart, it's a 3D beat 'em up rather than a pure sports game, and like all good 3D beat 'em ups it's built around accessibility and versatility – experimenting with different fighters will be as attractive as mastering one. We're promised 'extensive' online competition to capitalise upon this, but EA refuses to be drawn on exactly what it will entail. Unlike *UFC Undisputed*, *EA Sports MMA* isn't limited to one league, which might give it the edge in terms of fighter selection, but it's the detail that will prove the real clincher. Blood will stay on the mat, for instance, rather than magically disappearing.

There's no evidence of visual damage feedback in this early build – no blood, no bruises, no visibly jaw-shattering punches – but given its close relationship with *Fight Night*, it's unlikely to fall short in that area. *EA Sports MMA* already shows the admirable fidelity to the sport that has happily come to characterise the label; if it can deliver on all of its promises, it's surely championship material.



Unless the president of the UFC drops his threats, the overlap between *EA Sports MMA*'s roster and *UFC Undisputed*'s is likely to be limited to Randy Couture, whose inclusion in both games had to be agreed in court



Infighting

There's been more than a little controversy over *EA Sports MMA* in mixed martial arts circles. The president of the Ultimate Fighting Championship, Dana White, has threatened to blacklist any fighter who lends his likeness to the game, claiming that EA has made a sudden about-turn in its attitude to the sport after passing up the opportunity to work with the official licence. If White follows through on his threats, this could be the first instance in which a sports videogame has had a tangible impact on the real-life sport; sadly it's ostensibly a negative one.



Fighters are drawn from all across the MMA universe rather than from just one league; Strikeforce has been confirmed as a premier league, along with its commentary team and its flagship fighters, Brett Rogers and Jake Shields



Renegade Kid's already serviceable 3D engine has been improved, handling detailed exterior locations without a hitch. Monster design is equally sharp, even if their animation isn't always buttery smooth

FORMAT: **DS**
PUBLISHER: **SOUTHPEAK GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **RENEGADE KID**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **Q1 2010**

Dementium II

Dual worlds for dual screens as the lunatics take over the asylum

Hell hath no fury like a developer scorned. With sci-fi FPS *Moon* failing to take off at retail, Renegade Kid now channels its fury straight back into Hell. Championed as an uncharacteristically nasty aside in the DS catalogue, *Dementium* answers to its fans as returning horror movies often do: mythology broadened, gruesomeness upped. Locations multiply, skin is subtracted; a grander village setting floods with flayed bulldogs and giggling meat piles aborted from a Clive Barker-like imagination.

Silent Hill also seems to play on Renegade Kid's charnel house of a mind, not only in the snow-clad exteriors but in frequent cuts between this world and a hell dimension. With its maggot-vomiting guardians, putrid green skies and corpses caught in industrial machinery, Hell is certainly striking. We wonder, however, about the purpose of the switch considering the same monstrosities seem to prowl both realms. Unfolding narrative aside, it's more a case of out of the frying pan and into a retextured frying pan.

Whatever our purpose in all this, we will at least discover it in greater comfort. The original's brutal save system (once, at the beginning of tough levels) has been shanked in favour of regular breaks and the flashlight no longer needs to be toggled, *Doom 3* style, with weaponry. In a nod to *Castlevania*, a map on the lower screen points out doors of interest, reinforcing a general *Metroid* vibe of using new items to access previously blocked areas. A slick drag-and-drop touch-screen inventory rounds out the innovations, none of which sort the perennial problem of the DS FPS player's claw – a fate worse than any number of Satanic dimensions.



Survival is a case of stretching melee weapons as far as they'll go and hoarding precious little ammunition for tough boss encounters. Luckily, ranged attackers are few and far between, so your bullets don't get wasted

FORMAT: **360, PS3, PSP**
PUBLISHER: **EA**
DEVELOPER: **VISCERAL GAMES**
ORIGIN: **US**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 12**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E204, E205**

Dante's Inferno

A deeper circle of Visceral Games' Hell reveals new horrors, and raises some new questions

At three months from release, *Dante's Inferno* feels predictably fluid to play. Dante is a powerful, satisfying protagonist, his weapons – whirling scythe and glowing cross – slicing and burning through everything at a blistering pace, only slowing down occasionally to emphasise a particularly gory finish. But this isn't gleeful violence; we're not ripping off limbs or decapitating demons with a smirk, relishing over-the-top fountains of blood. *Dante's Inferno* is grim and disturbing, its violence as shocking as it is cathartic. The tortured wailing of the dead that forms the perpetual aural backdrop to the game is far removed from *Devil May Cry*'s energetic metal, even if the demon-infested Gothic setting isn't always a million miles away.

This game has a real eye for the grotesque. The new circle of Hell shown at our demo, Lust, boasts inventive and sometimes distressing new horrors, among them naked female demons whose finishing moves involve enveloping Dante in their carnivorous genitals. He uses the limbs of the tormented dead as climbing aids, and the decision to redeem or punish lost souls is accompanied by a suitably graphic cutscene. There are times, though, when *Dante's Inferno* goes too far in its grotesqueness, crossing the line dividing morbidly enjoyable and uncomfortable. Cutting through unbaptised babies with a scythe, their arms replaced with charred stubs, feels decidedly icky, something hardly eased by the fact that they spawn from the nipples of a giant, demonic Cleopatra.

All of this discomfort is definitely intentional – this is supposed to be western culture's prime depiction of eternal torment, after all, and it displays a certain bravery not to cloak it in humour and bravado. It's the depiction of Hell, rather than the hack-and-slash gameplay, that really distinguishes *Dante's Inferno* from its rivals, and that may ultimately determine its success.

There are moments of grand spectacle in *Dante's Inferno* to rival any in the genre. It may not be original, but smashing hordes of demons is still satisfying





The naked temptresses that inhabit the particular circle of Hell known as Lust straddle the line between being acceptably over the top and obscene for the sake of it

Napoleon: Total War

Sega's strategy favourite looks to France in an attempt to attract new admirers – and keep its core audience engaged

FORMAT: **PC**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **THE CREATIVE ASSEMBLY**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY**

With six well-received major launches under its belt and a tried-and-tested formula to fall back on, you would imagine that it's tempting for The Creative Assembly to stick a pin in the history books, pick an untapped period of history and churn out another hit. Not so. Instead, the UK studio has opted to follow up last year's magnificent *Empire: Total War* with something a little different.

Rather than concentrate specifically on a set period of time, *Napoleon*, as its title suggests, moves towards a more narrative-driven campaign mode. Players take command of the titular French leader and the men at his disposal throughout a series of iconic battles from 1797 to 1815. In an extension of *Empire*'s Road to Independence mode, the campaigns are split into three major sections – Italy, Egypt and Europe – arriving finally, of course, at Waterloo. Once they've conquered all before them with the French, players will also be able to try their hand with a number of different factions, including the Austrians, Russians and Prussians. The game will boast 355 new units – more than *Empire* featured out of the box.

It's not just the overall focus that has changed; there's also been a move to provide newcomers with a less-daunting UI during the campaign and battle scenarios. Although the final interface was still to be finalised in the pre-beta version we played, a more streamlined, intuitive system was already starting to take shape.

Napoleon's engine is essentially a polished version of *Empire*'s and, while there are still tweaks to be made if the animation and pathfinding in particular are to be up to scratch come release, overall initial impressions are favourable. The lighting modes look to have been overhauled, while attention has also been afforded to improving the physics system.

Campaign AI seems solid, which will be a relief to those who were dissatisfied with the way *Empire* performed pre-patching. In fact, the studio claims that the improvements introduced with *Empire*'s 1.5 patch will be the absolute base level for Napoleon where AI is concerned. Individual units now have a better understanding of the benefits of, say, taking up a strong position on high ground and they'll receive appropriate boosts to morale and aiming stats – or deficits if fighting a literal uphill battle.

Generals have improved influence in *Napoleon*, with those troops within range receiving significant combat buffs relative to the strength of the leader in question. With additional abilities allowing them to rally disheartened troops and inspire those still in the heat of battle to fire faster and more accurately, skilful deployment – and protection – of generals is now paramount.

Another major innovation for the new game is the implementation of a supply line system. Sending troops out into hostile environments without a sufficient support network is now a recipe for disaster. Judicious use of supply depots is the order of the day. In addition, armies can no longer be reinforced through simply splashing some cash – they'll now be automatically reinforced depending on the strength of your supply chain, the current season and distance from home among other factors.

A brief dalliance with multiplayer suggests that as much attention has been lavished here as on the impressive campaign mode, making this an enticing overall package set to appeal to *Total War* fans old and new – providing, of course, that the required polish is applied in time for the February release date.

Expect to see up to 10,000 troops onscreen – or more. "We always cap at 10,000 but modders tend to uncap it within 24 hours," says studio communications manager Kieran Brigden



Brigden's confident that *Napoleon*'s streamlined battle UI will help to ease *Total War* newcomers in while keeping veterans happy: "We want people to have a very deep experience – but not one that's overwhelming at the off"



Just dropping by

***Napoleon*'s singleplayer campaign will be enhanced by the ability to have friends or, if you prefer, strangers take control of opposing armies or navies whenever you head into battle. The optional drop-in mode will automatically send invitations out via Steam, allowing those *Total War* veterans who feel the battle AI is not enough of a challenge to take on human opposition – either on a battle by battle basis, or for the whole of the campaign.**

It's a smart move, prompted by community feedback, designed to add a variety and longevity to the experience.







Remaining in strong light is a key to survival: the shadow boy disappears when he falls into a solid block of shade, effectively dying. This should prove easier outside the castle

Lost In Shadow

Hudson Soft moves out of the shade of Bomberman with this idiosyncratic take on the platformer puzzler

Hudson Soft has been trading on the glories of Bomberman for so long it came as something of a shock when this very different proposition was revealed earlier in the year. Alongside the forthcoming Wii thriller *The Calling*, *Lost In Shadow* (originally translated as *Tower of Shadow*) represents an impressively tangential move away from explosive maze action.

The action follows a boy who exists only as a shadow, cast on the walls of a dilapidated Gothic castle. His aim is to reach the top of the fortress, by running and leaping through a series of rooms, using the shadows cast by various structures as platforms. The shape of these shadows changes depending on the distance and angle of the light source, and it's the player's job to tweak these sources to create a safe shadow path for the hero. In one chamber, for example, a collection of ancient stones seem to cast completely disorganised shadows onto the wall, but when the light is moved slightly, a shady bridge is created.

You must also protect the boy from traps such as moving objects which disrupt the shadow path, or pieces of furniture that project shadows that look like sharp spear points. It's also vital to stay in the light; large expanses of darkness effectively consume the character forever. Apparently, there will also be enemy characters in each room – at first it was thought that these would have to be avoided, but it seems our boy is equipped with a sword, so battle will play a part.

Lost In Shadow is a 2D platform puzzler, then, given a fascinating lateral slant by reversing the player's usual relationship to onscreen objects; the pipe systems, stone paths, wooden boxes and hulking medieval machinery that inhabit each screen are all effectively out of bounds, the action taking place behind them in the recesses. The setting is lent further gentle charm by the fact that you manipulate objects in the world via a fairy named Spangle, accentuating comparisons with Peter Pan (who boasted a fairy helper *and* a disembodied shadow).

Lazy allusions have been made to *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, perhaps due to the slightly offbeat premise and castle setting; *Prince Of Persia* is also being namechecked. Lead designer Osamu Tsuchihashi has, however, claimed that the idea is inspired by a childhood playground game, and also by Hayao Miyazaki's '70s anime series, Future Boy Conan. Whatever the case, *Lost In Shadow* is a genuinely intriguing prospect – and the fact that each room is a self-contained riddle suggests that Hudson Soft may well provide new levels as DLC. We could be spending a lot of time lurking in the shadows next year.

A boyish lead character, an earthy colour palette, a gloomy castle location – it's little wonder *Lost in Shadow* has drawn early comparisons with Fumito Ueda's *Ico*



As well as controlling the shadow boy, players must also direct a fairy-like character named Spangle who can manipulate light sources to create new shade paths

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **HUDSON SOFT**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **TBC 2010**



Of shadows and landscape

***Lost In Shadow* is only the latest in a series of titles where changes to viewing angle and/or perspective have solid ramifications on progress. In the PSN title *Echochrome*, for example, altering the viewing angle creates new pathways for the character. There are similar effects in the indie game *Fez* (set to hit XBLA next year), Zoë Mode's cult PSP puzzler, *Crush*, and even *Super Paper Mario*. Comparisons have also been drawn with *Shadow Physics*, a 2D platform game with a shadow lead character, shown off at GDC 2009's Experimental Gameplay Sessions.**

FORMAT: **WII**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 9**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E206**







Considering the number of unlikely records that Guinness manages to cram into its well-known book, we find it surprising there isn't a *Super Monkey Ball* entry: the 'same first level used in the most games' record

Super Monkey Ball: Step & Roll

A peripheral-centric platform-puzzler in which we learn to keep our balance when all about us are losing theirs

Among the glut of peripherals littering the **Edge** review warehouse at the moment – guitars, drums, skateboards and even a dusty old pair of maracas – it's easy to forget the humble Balance Board. But if the point of all this plastic is to create a greater connection with the onscreen action than a regular controller can offer, then Nintendo's white block may yet be due its day in the sun. After all, there's not too much difference between a monkey trying to stay upright inside a ball and a monkey trying to stay upright on a board.

The first thing you'll notice are the grooves in the levels. They're only there to begin with, and gently ease you in to a control scheme that responds to the tiniest shift of weight – go into this expecting a jolly rollaround and you'll be flying off the levels quick sharp. That's not to say the stages haven't been slightly widened in general, allowing a little more leeway for wobbles, but *Step & Roll* seems to strike a fine balance between letting you careen around bordered corners and down tubes, before asking for a little patience and practice as it progresses.

As well as singleplayer, we tried out the multiplayer mode in which a second player fires bananas to remove obstacles. Largely thanks to our wild jerks as we tried to slow down, and one complete disaster that acquainted us with a wall, it wasn't the smoothest of co-op experiences. A host of minigames round off the package with the Balance Board variants you'd expect – a foot-stomping mode, a skipping challenge depending on quick shifts of weight, and (best of all) proof that our Monkey Target skills remain intact. It takes a while to get used to the subtleties of navigating with your weight, but it provides a much-needed freshening of *Monkey Ball*'s basic mechanics – and a welcome new application for some kit we haven't used in a while.



SMB's visual style should translate effortlessly to the Wii, but this is decent-looking rather than outstanding: probably indicative of a 'test the market' budget

Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing

One of gaming's greatest back catalogues gets the karting treatment, with drifting enabled and tongue firmly in cheek

FORMAT: **360, PS3, WII**
PUBLISHER: **SEGA**
DEVELOPER: **SUMO DIGITAL**
ORIGIN: **UK**
RELEASE: **Q1 2010**
PREVIOUSLY IN: **E206**

Two things rather ruin the karting subgenre. The first is, despite an occasional blip, the consistently excellent *Mario Kart* series. The second is, despite an occasional blip, the fact that all the pretenders to *MK*'s throne are utterly rubbish. *Sonic & Sega All-Stars Racing* aims to be different, and to that end has a few things of its own going on: an instantly recognisable set of characters, for one, rather than a bunch of Crash Bandicoots, but more significantly it's got the ever-dependable Sega nerds at Sumo Digital on development duties.

If post-Dreamcast Sega has occasionally misfired with its classic franchises, Sumo Digital hit the mark when called upon. The recent *Sega Superstars Tennis* showcased a love for the company's heritage that's in evidence here: not the least element of which is *Shenmue*'s Ryo, dominating the Green Hill Zone with his forklift truck. Mind you, there's Alex Kidd on his motorbike, and Billy Hatcher riding a giant egg for the completists. Levels are similarly themed: *Monkey Ball* jungles, *Sonic* loops, cartoon castles and the bright blue skies to bring a tear to an old fanboy's eye.

More importantly, what's underneath feels very much like a rejigging of the *Outrun* handling model with which Sumo has shown great form in the past. These karts and tracks are built for drifting, whether it's a sharp turn or a long extended curve, and it's easy to get a basic grip on the teasing the controls require. Mastering the technique, especially on the winding routes of later levels, will be quite another story.

All-Stars Racing may yet turn out to be a wrong turn for Sega and Sumo Digital, but in the hands it feels more comfortable than you might expect. It looks and moves like you'd think '*Sonic Kart*' should. And sticking a rocket up your chum's exhaust as they try to speed away? Well, it feels just as good as it should – and perhaps that's the most important thing.



Knuckles can hardly be many Sega fans' favourite face from the *Sonic* universe, but the series' ever-expanding cast list is full of characters with even less personality, with Big the Cat and Shadow turning up for action here

The usual range of power-ups is on display, as well as a few more original tools. Something we'll call the confusotron, which turns your opponent's screen upside down, is a particular and rather evil highlight


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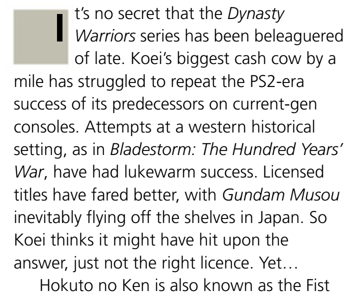
FORMAT: **360, PS3**
PUBLISHER: **KOEI**
DEVELOPER: **OMEGA FORCE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **MARCH (JAPAN), TBA (UK)**

Hokuto Musou

Koei's baddy-bashing, button-mashing series lines up another fresh start. Can the Fist Of The North Star break the west?



Densetsuhen is the campaign mode based on the original manga, which is the story of Kenshiro beating up his brothers. Series fans are excited, though, because of a new campaign called Gotohen which presents new scenarios, as well as the involvement of original artist Tetsuo Hara in the new visual design work



It's no secret that the *Dynasty Warriors* series has been beleaguered of late. Koei's biggest cash cow by a mile has struggled to repeat the PS2-era success of its predecessors on current-gen consoles. Attempts at a western historical setting, as in *Bladestorm: The Hundred Years' War*, have had lukewarm success. Licensed titles have fared better, with *Gundam Musou* inevitably flying off the shelves in Japan. So Koei thinks it might have hit upon the answer, just not the right licence. Yet…

Hokuto no Ken is also known as the Fist Of The North Star series, a charismatic post-apocalyptic tale in which a wanderer named Kenshiro protects the weak by beating up gangs. Developer Omega Force has focused on the action rather than the mega-scale of the *Musou* series, so that *Hokuto Musou* brings something of the spirit of *Final Fight* or *Streets Of Rage* into 3D. Strafing steps, grabs, throws and dodges give Kenshiro a more individual personality and style than the usual Dynasty Warrior, and for the first time the series is confident enough of its fighting system to introduce one-on-one battles.





The original idea for Fist Of The North Star involved combat focused on acupressure points, but don't get the wrong idea: *Musou*'s action is outlandishly extreme

They're fairly standard boss encounters, but seeing an enemy change their fighting style and use the environment – one of them is given to blowing up walls for a laugh – in a Koei game is new to us.

Even better is the debut of extensive physics. Those wall explosions send items flying around the room, and bodies deform under the pressure of powerful blows. And the surprises keep on coming: Koei's normal queasiness about violence has been shelved for this title. The world of Hokuto no Ken is one of violence, in language, situation and action, so obviously a bit of blood and dismemberment is essential. It's a good proof of concept for the new engine, at least, with bodies exploding, heads toppling and blood spilling. The game is unannounced as yet for the west, but bank on it landing before next Christmas.



FORMAT: **360**
PUBLISHER: **CAVE**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE**
ORIGIN: **JAPAN**
RELEASE: **FEBRUARY 25 (JAPAN), TBC (UK)**

Espgaluda II Black Label

More manic shooter action from the master of the genre – now polished and prettified for home consumption

Somehow, Xbox 360 has become the machine of choice for modern-day purveyors of bullet-hell shoot 'em ups. Back in the day, it was the Saturn, then the PS2, with the Dreamcast proving a lasting favourite. But with its more-than-capable specifications and relatively low development costs, Microsoft's machine has attracted Treasure, Moss (*Raiden IV*) and Cave, the latter of which is bringing its four-year-old arcade stormer *Espgaluda II* to the platform.

Set in a weird fantasy hybrid world of hi-tech aircraft and medieval architecture, this vertical scroller is another mesmerising assault on the eyes and reflexes. The aim, of course, is to navigate through a screenful of enemies and bullets. Alongside your main weapon there's a Kakusei mode that slows incoming bullets and turns them into collectable gold, and a guard barrier that renders you indestructible for a short while. As with the arcade version, players can select from a range of pilots, but the 360 iteration adds a new option in the form of cute boss character Seseri. The home version also updates the visuals and adds an array of as-yet unexplained modes including Novice, Arrange and Black Label. It comes complete with a double soundtrack CD, while a limited edition also includes a customised faceplate.

At ¥7,329 (£50), *Espgaluda II* isn't priced for curious newcomers, but Cave is clearly determined to attract a fresh customer base. Having only just released *Mushihimesama Futari 1.5*, it has this one planned for next February. A European release is doubtful unless the company can get its wares on to XBLA – there were reports last year that Cave's titles were being rejected by Microsoft due to a glut of arcade conversions. It seems there's only so much manic bullet punishment Xbox 360 users can take.



Espgaluda II is typical Cave fare with its hugely detailed sprites and convincing scenic depth. It's all updated on 360




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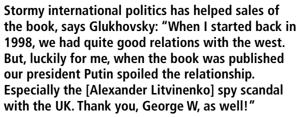
We go deep with Metro 2033 – the Russian post-apocalyptic shooter with its sights on politics

State Object 42 sits at the bottom of 36 flights of steps, its now-empty chambers and darkened tunnels shielded by 60 metres of rock, capped by steel and concrete. Above, Moscow has remained indifferent to the cavernous presence of the 'Protected Command Point' for over half a century. To look at the inauspicious building concealing its stairwell descent, you could little imagine that it marks the spot where Khrushchev determined the fate of the world in 1962, finally issuing the order to withdraw Russian missiles from Cuba. Left derelict, and bought by private investors in 2006, it has yet to relinquish all its secrets. Pacing through State Object 42's 7,000 square feet of cool corridors we hear the thrum of unseen machinery: a steady

TITLE: **METRO 2033**
FORMAT: **360, PC**
PUBLISHER: **THQ**
DEVELOPER: **4A GAMES**
ORIGIN: **UKRAINE**
RELEASE: **2010**







Stormy international politics has helped sales of the book, says Glukhovsky: "When I started back in 1998, we had quite good relations with the west. But, luckily for me, when the book was published our president Putin spoiled the relationship. Especially the [Alexander Litvinenko] spy scandal with the UK. Thank you, George W, as well!"



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whomp-whomp-whomp of pistons, while another room buzzes with electricity and others still echo to the rush of water from subterranean rivers. The rattle of subway trains travelling to Taganskaya station vibrate the nuclear bunker's red steel arches.

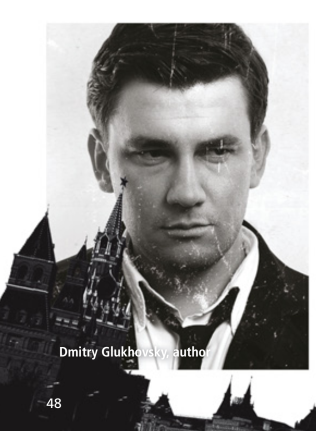
"A few notes on health and safety," begins the PR chap. "I don't think they do health and safety here. On the plus side, it's a nuclear bunker, so if anything happens up there this is the safest place in the world. If anything happens down here, we're probably all going to die."

Choosing to demonstrate a firstperson shooter in the nuclear bunker known as State Object 42 is not mere flamboyance on publisher THQ's part. *Metro 2033*'s story of post-apocalyptic survival takes as its starting point troubling truths about Moscow's underground railway system: its secondary purpose as the largest civilian nuclear shelter in the world, the hidden paths which connect it with State Object 42 and another 200 still-secret facilities dotted around the Moscow district. *Metro 2033* – both the original book and the subsequent videogame – may lurch off in fantastical directions, but the fiction is grounded in the actualities of communist paranoia, conspiracy theories carved into the very earth beneath Moscow.

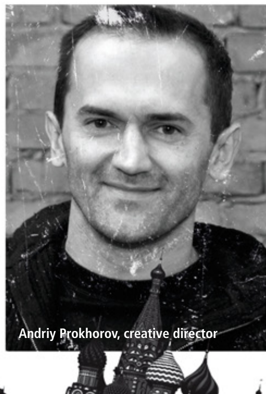
"You don't have to invent anything when writing about Moscow Metro," says author **Dmitry Glukhovsky**, who, due to the onset of flu, is holed up in the more hospitable surroundings of a nearby restaurant. "It's one of the weirdest things in this country and in Europe. What's formally considered to be a transportation infrastructure is not. From the very beginning in the '40s, '50s and '60s, it's been planned and constructed as a nuclear shelter. Hence the depth of the stations: 50 metres minimum. They're linked to the real bunkers, the 200 state objects that are located in Moscow. That's already, like, *what*? Can you imagine such a thing in Paris? And this is to say nothing of the fact that each station cost millions in marble and granite. And then there's the legendary separate Metro 2, linking the KGB building, the ministry of defence, Moscow State University and the great library where all the students will be if something happens. This has neither been confirmed nor denied by government. As a journalist I once asked the head of Moscow Metro directly and he refused to say anything about it. So what do you invent? You have so much to cover and tell. You don't have to find mutants with three eyes – when you start exploring the Metro it's so weird, and yet it's not science-fiction."

Glukhovsky's bestselling book, and the upcoming game by Ukrainian-based developer 4A, *is* science-fiction, however, and it does indeed have mutants. Playing as Artyom, a young survivor who barely remembers life before the bombs obliterated everything on the Earth's surface, you must travel through the Metro system, bartering for passage with the small pockets of human civilisation that survived the nuclear attacks. A new threat has emerged – a smart, bipedal mutant that psychically torments its prey with paralysing, insanity inducing visions. Artyom is charged with spreading the news but, as his travails reveal, humankind is often a more terrible enemy than the monsters that besiege it. Yet despite the elements of the allegorical, the fantastic and mystic that find their way into the game, its premise is chillingly credible.

"Right now, as people are reading this book, they don't find it too sci-fi," says Glukhovsky. "You listen to the news in Russia and you get the feeling that Doomsday



Dmitry Glukhovsky, author



Andriy Prokhorov, creative director



Each of Moscow's Metro stations has been given its own unique appearance by a specially commissioned designer. The book and game use this to allegorical effect, giving each enclave its own ideological bent. Artyom's passage through the station-states reveals the hypocrisies of each political system



THE STRONG AND SILENT TYPE

The game doesn't follow the book's action step for step. 4A has changed Artyom's precise itinerary and simplified both the script and the plot to fit – Glukhovsky has had a hand in this all, translating the shortened script back into Russian. The most profound change is that the lead character has had his voice removed in order to to turn him into a transparent avatar into which the gamer can slip. Some juggling has thus been necessary in order to introduce players to ideas the hero would usually deliver.

"Artyom has never seen the sky," explains creative director Andriy Prokhorov. "When he firsts sees the sky, we originally had an actor saying, 'Oh – sky!' But it wasn't working. Players wondered who was talking. So in another scenario we have him save the life of a small child, and carry him on his back. So we have the child say, 'What is this? A blue ceiling? Oh, it's *sky* – I know!' to introduce the player to this background."







Despite its biting politics, *Metro 2033* is an essentially humanitarian novel that pities its characters and advocates pacifism – perhaps an uncomfortable match for the firstperson shooter genre. Here, the Metro is cast as a purgatory between heaven and hell, as Glukhovsky explains: "[The survivors] hope to one day come up to the surface but they are unable to deserve salvation"

is coming. Every second day you read about the US installing the nuclear shield in the Czech Republic. And when you're over there [the US] you think that's a legitimate way of protecting your future. When you're over here you think that they're surrounding you with a nuclear wall, to contain you. I understand why post-apocalyptic fiction is very popular in Russia now. It always comes at the end of centuries. There were strong apocalyptic moods at the beginning of the 20th century and of the 19th: when such big numbers change, we feel our futility in a very sharp manner. My god! A thousand years – and if I'm lucky, I will live 80 years, if I don't smoke. On the other hand you can speculate that there is something else. For the first time in all of our history we've had ten years of prosperity – for everyone. Not just for the rulers, be that the tsar or the communists, but for everyone. For the first time we've got a middle class, earning enough to go to Turkey for the weekend. But now it has been too long, we have this feeling that it can't last. There's something tricky. It has to collapse. You start to imagine how it can happen."

***Metro 2033* offers** a pretty good idea of how it could happen – with the siren sounding a seven-minute warning and a frantic dash to the nearest subway; those lucky enough to get inside and far enough down are the only ones to stand a chance of survival. Though the Metro's deep, steel-clad tunnels were designed to protect life for three months, what if humanity was forced into a longer purgatory? *Metro 2033* posits the reformulation of society, banding together to form fractious, microcosmic station-states. The game is a linear shooter, but Artyom's fraught journey through the Metro is broken up by visits to these stations – bustling living hubs, among the more credible social spaces seen in games, where the remnants of humanity scrape a living. RPG-lite quests see Artyom interact with these impoverished, traumatised people, performing favours, or simply soaking up their incidental conversation, listening in on mothers reassuring children of the future or elders telling stories of the past. The scenes are beautifully realised, but as well as building a credible atmosphere, each has a secondary purpose of satirising the current political climes. One station is run on communist principles, another on fascistic ideals – the game's writing is careful to be even-handed, excoriating the failures of these systems, while portraying their people with some human understanding.

"I'm very concerned by what's happening in our political system," says Glukhovsky. "I'm quite spoiled by living in Europe and Israel for ten years. Of course, I appreciate all the material gains and achievements for our people, but what's been going on in our political system? Less and less freedom, less and less democracy, fewer real elections. I charge all my work with this context. There is a scene in the novel when the characters travel on secret governmental Metro lines under the Kremlin. They discover that it's occupied by a hypnotising biological mass that through the red stars on the Kremlin towers compels people to come in and devours them – it's been here for centuries; it's how the country's ruled." Glukhovsky is grinning. "The chapter is called 'Power'."

Not all of this high-minded satire can make it across to the game, and Glukhovsky is frank about the simplification of his material, saying that any adaptation

"I understand that every genre has its format and every genre has its limitations," says Glukhovsky of the faithfulness of the videogame adaptation. "For me the most important thing was that the game conveys the uniqueness of the setting, the spirit and the atmosphere and the visual climate. People should feel more or less what they feel when they read the book"



"WHEN THE APOCALYPSE COMES, IT COMES TO EVERYONE – IT'S TOO LATE TO UNDERSTAND WHO CAUSED IT, WHO WAS THE FIRST TO STRIKE"

is by definition a castration of the initial idea. "I'm fine with that," he says. What is important to him is that the game conveys the atmosphere and emotional weight of the book, and brings it to a wide audience.

"The thing that makes the book emotional is the story of survival, the story of keeping hope despite the knowledge that this world has no future. People trying to remain human in a world full of monsters, when even other people are monsters – this is the the moral message and it *can* be easily conveyed in a shooter. The game isn't just about running and firing, but talking to people, learning their stories and carrying out a mission with the desire to save the ones you love. They've managed to keep this atmosphere. Most importantly for me, the computer game, being a simplification of the book, makes the idea a hundred times more popular than a book can be initially. The simpler it is, the greater masses it will reach. A song by Lady Gaga will reach millions, while a book by William Burroughs will be something that only hundreds of thousands of people in the entire world will ever read."

And so, in the interests of popularism, *Metro 2033* is pitched as a linear cinematic shooter, albeit one couched in interesting ideas. As Artyom makes his journey to the political centre of the Metro-dwelling populace, he faces down the corrupted lifeforms and human bandits that lurk within the dilapidated tunnels. The depiction of decay here is realised with eminence, and gasmasked forays to the surface show a devastated Moscow reclaimed by nature – beautiful, desolate and foreboding. It also periodically slips away into the unreal: the new mutants, translated somewhat prosaically as 'the Dark Ones', prey upon Artyom's mind, conjuring unsettling hallucinations. Many of 4A's developers have previously worked on *Stalker*, and their acute sense for the eerie is reproduced here with hackle-raising effect, as a passing torch beam picks out the shadow of an unseen figure, or your companions are entranced by unheard singing.

Though such sequences, and the drawing of the world, are effective in creating a sense of unease, the spectre of atmosphere is often disrupted by the action. It

4A's proprietary engine throws a lot of filters over the screen to root the player in the protagonist's body – blurring and distorting the screen when under attack. Combined with the overlay of your gasmask – which frosts up and occasionally cracks – it can be quite disorienting



UNDERGROUND HIT

Now 30, Glukhovsky started writing Metro 2033 when he was just 17 and originally published it in free instalments online. Finally printed in 2005, it quickly became a bestseller, shifting 450,000 copies in Russia alone and chalking up over four times that number of readers online. The sequel, Metro 2034, did similarly well, and an English translation of the first book is pending.

"I think that here in Russia, especially, science-fiction has always been a retreat for people who think differently and want to convey their ideas to other people," says Glukhovsky, speculating on the success of his books. "But I'm going to change direction – I'm not going to stick forever with Metro. I'm about to release a book called Stories Of The Motherland. It's going to be phantasmagoria science-fiction – short stories that address all the problems between power and people."



Though it's possible to believe that people could survive in the Metro system for a number of months, the 20 years posited by Glukhovsky's fiction is maybe a bit of a stretch. "I've helped them," he says. "I've given them pigs and mushrooms and hydroponic vegetables"



doesn't quite convince: the field of vision is too restricted, movement too cumbersome for the frenetic assaults the game entails. There's time left before release for substantial tweaks, but the code as it stands is keen on thrusting monstrous enemy after enemy at you, long after the shock of their arrival has worn off, while restricting ammunition supplies with the miserly spirit of a survival-horror game. Nearly every encounter leaves you stumbling backward while slashing the air with a knife, which tends towards the monotonous rather than adrenalising. Though the game's core may be combat, perhaps with so much else to say, the developer's heart isn't in it.

This said, there are plenty of other intriguing mechanics bolted on – the currency down here is the bullet, and a complex economy sees you trading in pistol rounds for shotgun shells, or other upgrades, while trying not to spend vital supplies by firing them into enemies' heads. Many encounters permit alternative approaches, with silenced weaponry giving you the opportunity to keep the majority of your bullets for trade rather than murder. Irradiated areas require you to don a mask, the filters for which must be regularly replaced – either scavenged or bought. There's little in the way of a HUD to separate you from your environment – checking the amount of time left on your filter requires you to look at your watch, while the map, too, must be physically lifted before your eyes. In a nod to *Shadow Of The Colossus*, or perhaps Rambo: First Blood, your cigarette lighter's flame flickers in the direction of your objective.

These concepts encourage a pensive pace to the gameplay that the combat does not quite match. Yet as Glokhovsky jovially notes, "the average 13-year-old videogame player wants some action: 'Bring me some fresh meat!'" Obviously, his ambitions to be a world-renowned author benefit from this expansion towards a mainstream audience, as does the fact of the game's international publication – but there is a more thoughtful universality to *Metro 2033*'s message, too. It's essential to the spirit of the fiction that it doesn't matter who pushed the button first, says Glukhovsky: "When the apocalypse comes, it comes to everyone – it's too late to understand who caused it, who was the first to strike. Probably it was just an initial error, a computer bug. It doesn't matter who started the war. It's a terrible mistake for which the entire of mankind is responsible.

"There aren't going to be triumphant Cossacks waving rifles," continues Glukhovsky with some bite. "There will be the same-looking people suffering and going through the same emotions. [In the game] I didn't want Russians to be *Russians* [Glukhovsky says this last word frowning and rolling the R, briefly embodying the Hollywood caricature of the stern Soviet], I wanted them to speak with perfect American accents, and the only different thing to be their names. The idea of having this game published by an American firm is to show that, hey, on the other side of the ocean, on the other side of the conflict, everyone is human as well. And they suffer the same way, have the same hopes, the same fears. Everyone's tired of seeing Manhattan destroyed – let's see what happens on the other side."

With regard to the accents, at least, it's not an argument Glukhovsky won, and he says the game's western trailer, replete with R-rolling Russian voiceover, has been met with some consternation among fans of the book: "Russians are sick and tired of American movies describing the life of Russians played by Czechs or Poles. I posted the game's trailer on my blog, and every second Russian person commenting said: 'What's this idiotic Russian accent again? Why do they have to portray us as morons?' I had a tough time convincing the audience that [THQ] hadn't portrayed us as morons." He has had some victories: persuading THQ's marketing team not to replace the 'R' in Metro with the Cyrillic character 'Я' – which, despite its similar appearance, is actually a vowel.

Though its ambitions to muscle in on *Call Of Duty* may be misplaced, *Metro 2033* looks to be a fascinating game in other respects – simultaneously evoking a distinctly Russian setting, with all the rich history of those secretive, subterranean constructions, while hammering home a message about the universality of human experience and human suffering. At a time when the biggest videogame launch in the world sees ruthless Russian extremists parachuting on to American soil, the notion that nobody in Russia or America would truly relish the results of Mutually Assured Destruction is one worth repeating.



"Apocalyptic fiction is a fashion, a vogue, a wave everyone's riding right now," says Glukhovsky. "Space sagas were popular back in the '70s, and then we had a period when cyberpunk was very popular in the '80s, and then fantasy things were very popular, inspired by Tolkien, in the '90s. Apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction is popular right now. It will fade away, as all waves do"



PERFORMANCE ART

HOW DO YOU INSTIL POLYGONS WITH HUMAN VITALITY? WE TALK TO THE DIGI-DRAMATISTS ON THE CUTTING EDGE OF MOTION CAPTURE



If you'd asked us back in September whether we cared about the death of the cinematic narrative in a non-linear, interactive medium, we would have probably shrugged pensively before going back to stroking our beards in front of *Slitherlink*. It took *Uncharted 2* to remind us that we don't actually mind games that try to be films – so long as those films are pretty good. Historically, however, games have swung wildly at the lowest hanging fruits of cinema, and yet still somehow failed to reach them. Naughty Dog, meanwhile, managed to combine a tight script with snappy direction, breathing life into its CG cast with credible human expressions, transforming them into complex, sympathetic characters with emotive voice-acting. Who would have guessed this might be a winning combination?

Of course, if it was that easy, we'd have engaging cinematic drama gushing from our consoles. More often than not we have horrifying digital mannequins, jerking about like malfunctioning wind-up toys while bored stage-actors drone through the dialogue, wondering if they'll ever play Hamlet again. Clearly there are many hurdles – technical, practical and ideological – that lie in the way of getting as complete and evocative a performance as Naughty Dog has achieved. But there are now also solutions for developers, offered by thirdparty companies specialising in staging CG performances, combining directorial nous, cutting-edge capture technology and animation expertise, reshaped to fit varying budgets, scheduling and technical requirements.

"I think developers are now acutely aware that they need to have believable characters that can carry a story," says **Mick Morris**, MD of Audiomotion, which provides capture services for TV, film and games. "But purely from a technical point of view, it's only in the last few years that we've been able to wrestle a good solution for that out of the available technology."

Morris points to the latest generation of consoles as the leap in capacity which enabled detailed, lifelike animation in realtime. And in no other area is this as true as the face, the subtleties of which can only be conveyed through a comparatively large expenditure of a game's technology budget – or so it is often thought.

Illustration: Paul Smith/Busty Kelp

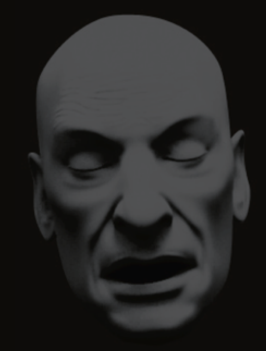




"We've found we can deliver a very solid performance with a limited marker set," says Imagination Studios' John Klepper. "It's mostly about the placement rather than number"

"Game companies have been avoiding the face," says CEO **Mike Starkenburg** of facial mo-cap specialist Image Metrics. "We call it 'the illegitimate helmet'. There are guys in gasmasks but never any gas in sight. Faces are so difficult to do right that it's risky, and in terms of the engine's tech budget, the face can easily be three times as expensive to move as the body.

"The geometric shape of the head – that's the mesh. The process of moving that mesh in a believable way is rigging. You could move it one vertex at a time, but that would take forever. Instead, animators create a set of controls. One, for example, will open the eye and another will close the eye. I'm simplifying – most mouth rigs have 20 different controls. The body has probably 20 controls. The face can have 60, sometimes a couple of hundred. You can get a really good facial rig with relatively few controls – equal to that of the body – but it's an optimisation problem, and most people simply haven't done enough facial rigs to get good at solving it. We have. Inadvertently, we've become world experts in facial rigging. Many animators will spend their lives animating bodies and cars and so on, but how many faces do they really do? Even a game like *Grand Theft Auto IV* has, like, 80 characters. We've done literally thousands. So we always look at the facial rigs when we walk in and try and persuade developers to adopt our strategies."



"IN TERMS OF THE ENGINE'S TECH BUDGET, THE FACE CAN EASILY BE THREE TIMES AS EXPENSIVE TO MOVE AS THE BODY"

No other area is as crucial to producing an emotional performance as the face, says **John Klepper**, CEO of mo-cap firm Imagination Studios: "The face is everything – we as humans look at faces from the day we are born, and we have an amazing perception of its subtleties. In order to be able to transfer those extreme subtleties to animation takes an in-depth understanding of how to rig and skin and weight a character correctly. Eighty per cent of the rigs we get sent look like hell – there's not a lot of competence, and the difference can be huge if you have something mere millimetres out of place."

That in-depth understanding is an elusive thing. As Klepper, Morris and Starkenberg say in near unison, the major stumbling block for developers has been in building up the required level of in-house expertise – not simply on the technical side of animation, but in understanding the vicissitudes of motion-capture itself, a process which requires both a keen knowledge of the technology but also demands other skillsets: directing, acting and cinematography.

Audiomotion's frequent collaborator, Side, specialises in delivering casting and direction for mo-cap productions. "This is what we do day in, day out for a multitude of different companies," says Side's managing director, **Andy Emery**. "Developers have to come up with a pipeline for getting these performances in-game, but that's a problem we might have already solved on another project. We get to learn from all the different processes that people try. A developer just doesn't have that exposure. They might do one project in two years – we'll do 25 similar projects in that same time."

Equally, Klepper's experience working for Starbreeze has left him an advocate of outsourcing animation: "The lifespan of the game can be 18 to 24 months, but the time that animation is required, if it's well planned out, may only be six or nine months. So, if you have it in-house, you crunch like crazy during that period, but what are you doing for the rest of it? I came over from LA to get Starbeeze's internal mo-cap studio up and running. I got a very in-depth view of the pros and cons of having a large internal team. The result of it was they had to close the

OUTSOURCE OF CONCERN

Developers have been rightly intimidated by the prospect of outsourcing such a large and significant part of their creative vision. Dialogue is, after all, often the way in which the game sells its world to the player.

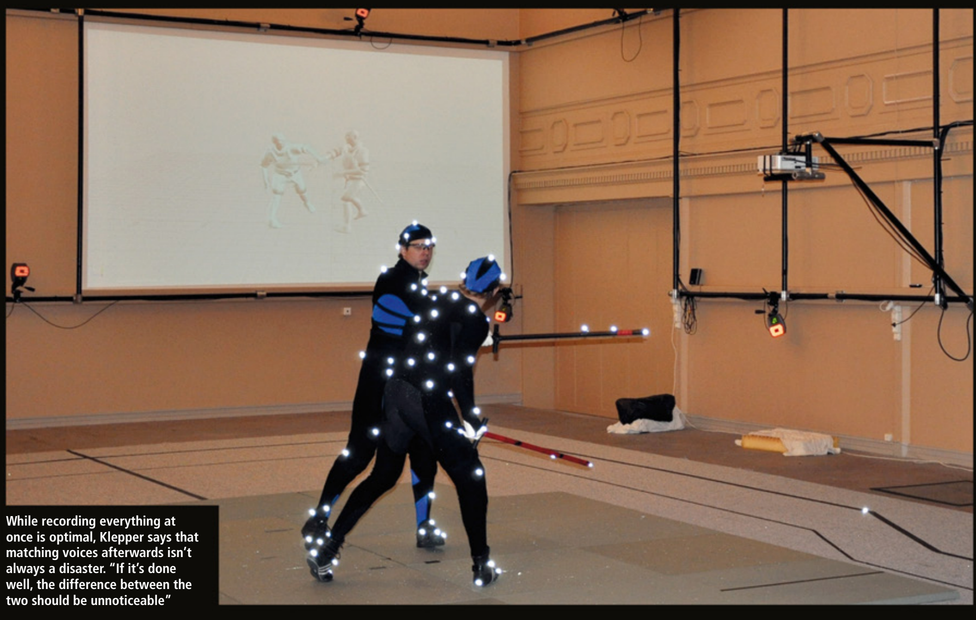
"I think there's often a fear that Side is going to take the scene in a different direction," says Emery. "We have to say: 'No, this is *your* scene'. It's a partnership with your art director to get the performance the scene demands. Developers have a great understanding of what the scene is but often lack the shared director-actor language of how to get that performance. It's often the case that the projects we've been most involved in have got the better reviews at the end of the day – but of course you have to earn that trust."

Can there be problems matching an aesthetic to the vision of the original art team? Klepper: "There can be problems, of course – but there can be problems internally, with a developer's own employees. People, artists especially, have different opinions, and it's hard to appease everybody. But the key for Imagination Studios is listening and having the experience of dealing with other clients. A lot of this is ironed out in the testing phase, so we hammer down what they're looking for before production."









While recording everything at once is optimal, Klepper says that matching voices afterwards isn't always a disaster. "If it's done well, the difference between the two should be unnoticeable"

mo-cap studio down because it was too expensive. They still have a small team of very competent internal animators but they outsource quite extensively."

Not all studios are beholden to outsourcing, of course, as Morris points out, citing EA's mo-cap studio in Canada, Sony's San Diego studio and Activision's capture setup in Santa Monica. But, even then, he suggests that outsourcing may bring interdisciplinary expertise that would otherwise be unavailable.

"There's always going to be that pressure to use those internal resources," says Morris. "But the breadth of work *we* do, bringing experience from Hollywood blockbusters, music promos, commercials – perhaps those internal teams don't have this much exposure to those influences."

One other reason that the industry has struggled to squeeze scintillating performances from its CG casts is simply timing. The production methods of film clash with the fluid, ever-changing nature of game development, says Side's Emery: "The process of capturing performances for games has often been driven by horrible phrases like 'vertical slice' – it doesn't work. You need to get creative people engaged, involved and on a contract for a period of time before they move on to other projects. The technology and capture method has too often defined how we get these performances rather than being driven by the fundamentals of the performance itself."

"Having to lock down your script is a terrifying thing for developers," says Morris. "But there are huge benefits. If they do draw a line in the sand and work back from there in terms of rehearsing actors and having the director spend as much time with them as possible, then ultimately they're going to get much stronger performances."

But whether developers prioritise the performance-capture schedule or not, there are always awkward practicalities that both Side and Audiomotion are adept at working around. Emery describes full performance-capture – capturing sound, body and facial animation all at once – as the holy grail, but it is sometimes impossible to implement.

"Often, you have to record the voice, and then do the mo-cap with completely different actors," he explains. "Take *Guitar Hero* – these tracks were already been recorded. So we got someone who was bloody good at miming to belt out those tracks, and we got the facial animation from those sessions. Sometimes, because of the constraints of the vocal talent, the voice work is already recorded in LA, the developer brings audio files to the mo-cap session and you'll have actors mime to the pre-recorded stuff. It's not the best way to do it, but if that's the only option, we'll take that approach."

Nor is it ever a given that your voice-actors will actually be capable of the physical performance required for motion-capture. And, if you aim for A-list celebrity talent, it may simply be more economical to use other actors as their bodies for the lengthier mo-cap shoots.

"If you want Vin Diesel's voice for the main character," says Klepper, "you're



A current project for Imagination Studios is *Alan Wake*. Klepper says that the studio will really come into its own "when tech takes the next big jump and starts to look like film. It's not a long way off"



Richard Scott, MD, Axis Animation



Andy Emery, MD, Side



John Klepper, MD, Imagination Studios



Mick Morris, MD, Audiomotion



Mike Starkenburg, CEO, Image Metrics

Imagination Studios doesn't just hire out cavernous mo-cap stages. "We try to do the full art outsourcing," says Klepper. "Assets, cinematics, rendering, effects"







Image Metrics has videos showing it can match a video of a face without markers. Starkenburg: "We have a version of Emily [above] that'll run in a game engine – we just can't find one that can do it!"

going to have to spend an unbelievable fortune to get him in a studio for three or four weeks while you shoot all the body data. Alternatively, you spend one or two days in a voiceover booth and get all the audio, then get somebody else to play the physical performance. In that situation where you have pre-existing voice, you then have the tricky task of getting the performances to match."

Emery is sceptical of the benefits of getting in big names for this very reason. "It's not about getting triple-A actors," he says. "I don't think *Uncharted 2* has triple-A actors – it has *great* actors. We find it frustrating when what we want to do is rehearse, try a few different things, maybe go through it a bit slowly, work on the script – and that's a very difficult sell when you hire a Hollywood star for just a few hours."

But actors are only one of three essential ingredients, continues Emery: "There's a misconception that a good actor will make something out of a bad script. They will make it better than a bad actor doing it, but they won't make it. Script, casting and direction are the base tools. You can put great actors together, but without good direction they'll soon lose their focus. If it looks like you don't know how to get a performance out of them, they can disengage quite quickly with a project."

This is not wisdom that has percolated down to all game developers, however, many of whom, for budgetary or aspirational reasons, repurpose members of staff from elsewhere in the company to act as directors or writers, when they are perhaps not as well qualified as they might believe. While Emery says the majority of Side's clients now use external directors, there are still some horror stories: "Sometimes people will say: 'Oh, well, I used to work in this drama group'. That's fine, but it is the equivalent of me saying: 'Well, I did a bit of claymation at school – can you let me have a go at one of your character models?' When

our directors aren't working for us, they're directing theatre or directing TV. They *are* directors – that's what they do. We're vocal enough that developers know the implications of using a director without directing experience, but we can't go too much further than that."

"What we see ranges from the animator writing the dialogue to productions similar to a Hollywood movie with a director and a second," says Image Metrics' Starkenberg. "There is a pattern developing, and the people who are most organised tend to be the people working on franchises. Storytelling in games is coming. People are doing more of it, but they're used to being limited by the technology. I don't think they believe they can get the subtlety in the movement, so they don't do all the other stuff that's required to make that a good shot. You need great writing, great casting, great acting, great directing – if you have all that and a great engine there's no reason we can't put that performance in a game. It's just that all this has rarely come together for games."

Perceptions are changing, however, and developers are slowly waking up not only to the importance of getting drama right, but also the humbling fact that they might not always be the best ones to do it. Emery explains: "We used to see a lot of work which was just a case of putting a cast together and letting the developer direct and record it, however hit or miss that may be. And that was a progression from: 'Have you got a studio we can record in?' It's an important step-change we've seen already."

"People are slowly starting to realise that mo-cap can be a good and easy thing," says Klepper when we ask if Imagination Studios finds that there's still a need to educate developers about mo-cap's pitfalls and solutions. "Unfortunately there's a whole history of studios that churn out mo-cap data with the intent of producing quantity over quality. It's tricky because mo-cap data can be a real pain in the ass. How it's solved to the rig, what kind of rig it is, how it gets put into the engine – all kinds of things can go wrong, especially when studios just hand over data. I'd say 60 per cent of the clients who come to us say that they hate motion-capture – and then they realise pretty soon that it can actually be a pleasure."



Killzone 2's mo-cap was a collaboration between Axis, Side and Audiomotion, using a number of different methods – some full capture, some performances recorded later in voiceover

"STORYTELLING IN GAMES IS COMING. PEOPLE ARE DOING MORE OF IT, BUT THEY'RE USED TO BEING LIMITED BY THE TECHNOLOGY"



"It's about changing the way people work as much as it is about changing the amount of budget they allocate," says Emery. "To get the most out of a full performance-capture scenario, it's about getting people involved early. It's about being organised and considering that you might want to do your voice at the same time as your motion-capture. It's about having had a great scriptwriter involved from an early stage."

There are, as Audiomotion's Morris observes, many ways to skin a cat. The choices facing developers are a little overwhelming – if and how they choose to break down the capture into multiple sessions, separating motion and audio, being the primary decision. But there are also different technologies involved in capture, each with their own champions, benefits and drawbacks.

The method most will be familiar with involves markers being placed all over a body, and a large number of static cameras tracking the movement of these markers to build up a 3D picture of the body's movements. It's a technique that can easily be scaled up to include multiple actors interacting on a soundstage, or scaled down to capture the minor movements of the face. Voice can also be recorded at these same sessions, permitting the full performance to be captured in a single sitting.

"In an ideal world, I'd go for full performance-capture every time," repeats Emery. "But whether you are capturing that physical or facial performance or not we all give a different performance when we're moving. We work very hard to try and incorporate that physicality into as many performances as possible. For a long time we've had a lot of disparate elements put together to create a single performance and I think we've all seen how they can suffer from that. Anything you can do to tie those elements together is enormously beneficial."

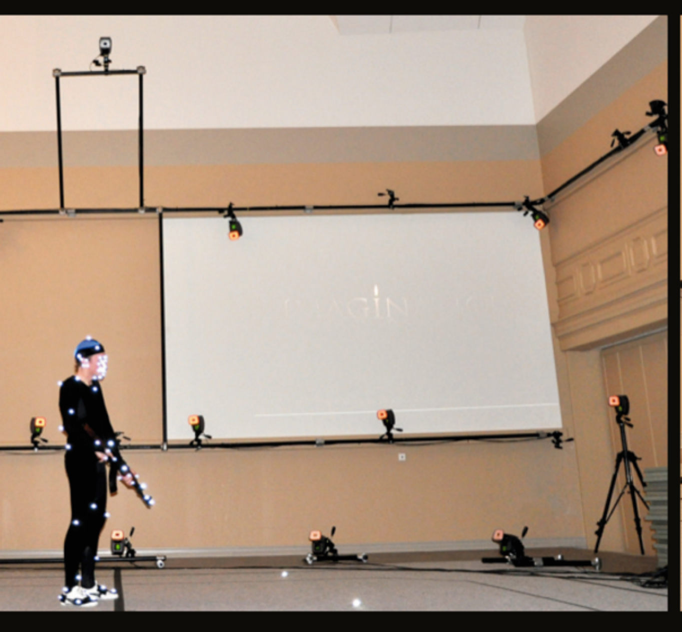
But there are plenty of instances when this isn't possible – and the video-capture technology pioneered by Image Metrics offers a useful alternative to marker-based facial-capture methods.

"You can't get the same degree of subtlety with markers," claims Starkenburg. "The process of putting markers on is complicated, and you can easily occlude some of the dots when you scrunch your face up – or they can fall off. Body motion-capture works really well, but the limbs are fairly large and well-spaced. Faces are so small and to capture an emotion requires so many little movements. What a lot of people do right now is mo-cap the body and hand-animate the face. But if you're doing it by hand, it's time consuming. [Video-capture] is affordable and efficient. You can divide

MOVERS AND SHAKERS

As much as CG is a brave new world for the moving image, both Axis Animation and Imagination Studios revere the traditional methods of film-making, and are insistent on bringing the hard-learned techniques from that medium to motion-capture.

"Cameramen in the film industry spend years developing this very fine skill," says Imagination Studios' Klepper. "How do we move this camera? How do we block this scene? How can we make it feel so smooth that no one will notice the camera's moving? The animation world tends to feel, well, we can stick our camera wherever, so lets keyframe it quickly, place it over here and move on to the next shot. We want to amaze our audience with that filmic language, which is why in our studio we very often hire professional cameramen to shoot while we're recording. And we capture the camera's movements and replicate it in the animation – so it acts exactly like a film set."





that up between really high quality or really high volume, but either way it's much more effective than doing it by hand.

"We capture from video – any video," Starkenburg continues. "We've actually had people take stuff on their iPhone and been able to use it. Most of our customers capture video while they're doing a voiceover, but we can use any picture of a face that is relatively straight on – we can go 20 degrees in either direction. That's where the maths comes in. We then plot changes in the values of texture and light from frame to frame and use some statistical validation to say: 'This is a face, so that must be an eye'. The human face has a statistical average: the eyes can only be a certain amount apart, the nose will be above the mouth, the tip of the nose will be in front of the cheek, and so on. We actually started off a lot more generalised, not just dealing with faces, and have since spun out a medical company to look at X-rays. They'll look at an image and say statistically a spine looks like this, and if they then take a long series of X-rays – say, one a month for two years – they can look at the changes in the same way we look at frames in a video, and diagnose disease."



Sean Pertwee slipped into mo-cap gear to play the part of Commander Radec in *Killzone 2*. Although some facial data was captured, for the most part during the game Radec's face is covered by a mask

The quality of the results are astounding – so much so that one of Image Metrics' demonstration videos tricks you into thinking you are watching the capture footage when in fact it is the CG model. But though, as Starkenburg says, technology which allows you to pull 3D data from a 2D image is "really very cool", it's clear that it is not without its drawbacks.

"The problem I have with the video-capture method is that the actor has to look straight down a camera," says Emery. "You can have head cameras, and with a single actor that's OK, but feeding back the comments I've heard from actors and directors, if you've got a group of actors performing an action scene or an intimate scene and they've all got little cameras looking back at their faces, it can be quite difficult. Interestingly, if you have markers attached to your face, you soon forget about it. It's not the same barrier to performance. The video-capture tech works well for things like RPGs where you've got a vast quantity of dialogue – I can see real merit in those scenarios. And if you're using a marker-based technology then you still have to do the eyes. Video-capture can track the eyes."

"The thing you notice with video-capture is how much unusual eye movement there is," says Starkenburg. "If you walk down a street and you see a girl sitting on a bench and you're checking her out, your eyes are all over the place – they're not doing what you think they're doing. An animator trying to estimate that doesn't get it right. We recently did this sports game – when the guys are running around and jumping and dunking, their faces are really expressive and it's not something a hand-animator would think about."

There are circumstances in which hand animation does the trick, however – particularly if you want larger-than-life results. The expressive faces of *Uncharted 2*'s cast, for example, were animated by hand.

"A lot of that's to do with the uncanny valley issue," says **Richard Scott**, managing director of Axis Animation, another collaborator with Audiomotion and Side. "An expression might look fine on a real person; when it's superimposed on a computer-generated character it loses its realness. You want to be able to exaggerate. A subtle smile might not read so well on a CG character, so you want to push that smile a little bit. So that's why people choose to refine the motion-capture or keyframe the faces from scratch. We actually chose to keyframe all of the *Killzone 2* intro animation. We couldn't get Brian Cox in a full-

MARKER MY WORDS

In last issue's Codeshop we talked to Phonetic Arts about its speech-synthesis technology. It's jaw-dropping in more ways than one: a by-product of speech generation is that it automatically generates lip-syncing time points, allowing Phonetic to build a system which automatically maps mouth animation to dialogue.

"The technology finds the phonemes and the words," says CEO **Paul Taylor**. "From that you can generate the mouth shape and facial animation. What we've done is a very simple product for finding phonemes in speech and you can plug that into any facial animation system that has a rig. A lot of speech is governed by context — I'll give you an example: when I say 'shoe' and 'shine', the 'sh' sound in both of those is said with different mouth shapes — but we have all the analysis already telling us which mouth shape to use in which position in which context. If you're taking a very good 3D video that can be reanimated, you should get a very reasonable animation out of that because you are doing simultaneous speech and motion-capture. But it's still quite difficult for people to get good definition on the lips. If you're using a marker technology, you don't have the teeth or the tongue. What we're trying to do is a step away from that: if you haven't recorded speech and video simultaneously, you can overlay different speech and different video and re-sync the lips — we're very much into the procedural side of things."







performance setup, or get a camera to shoot Brian while he was doing the voice – but keyframing gave us that little bit of extra flexibility to push him into hyperrealism."

Of course, there's one remaining question for developers: what can you afford? The studios we speak to are quick to insist on the relative good value of this investment ("It's a cost-effective way of engaging your player – getting that extra percentage score, getting those extra column inches," says Emery) but hiring out soundstages, directors and so on is clearly something that comes with a substantial price tag. Imagination Studios and Audiomotion are positioning themselves as high-end services, looking to the needs of big-budget titles. As such, they are reluctant to jeopardise their reputation for quality by offering cheaper options.

"Even if a client asks us for raw mo-cap data, we won't deliver it," says Klepper. "We don't insist on building the rigs ourselves but we do insist on solving the data to the rigs, so that we can at least ensure that when it leaves Imagination Studios it looks pretty good. If we can tweak the rig, or build a new one, we can get it much, much better. The benefit that our clients get is trust. We're going to listen to everything they need, we're going to send them tests, so they know that everything is perfect before any production work gets under way."

"We are, and always have been, about quality – so we can't launch a budget range," echoes Morris. "But there are other solutions. You've got software where you load in the audio files from your voiceover session and it generates mouth shapes (see 'Marker my words'). That, for lots of people, gives satisfactory results, but it misses all the nuance of real performance from real actors. There are subtle things that a director can bring to a session that you're not going to get out of a piece of software."

But you don't always need that level of subtlety in a game, where a mass of background characters may be suitably furnished with rudimentary face animations. Image Metrics' video-capture technology is thus the most scalable in terms of cost, since it doesn't require a stage, markers or an elaborate camera setup, and can be used to rapidly produce the 3D facial data for reams and reams of dialogue.



Audiomotion has recently revealed that it's working on Splash Damage's forthcoming shooter *Brink*, which presents an interesting mo-cap proposition with its articulate but highly exaggerated bodies

"THERE ARE SUBTLE THINGS THAT A DIRECTOR CAN BRING TO A SESSION THAT YOU'RE NOT GOING TO GET OUT OF A PIECE OF SOFTWARE"

"The top tier of games and the bottom tier of film are almost the same," says Starkenburg. "That tier is what we call the 'hero shot'. But you don't need that when the character is 35 feet away and facing three-quarters in the opposite direction. And there's lots of that in games, and what we offer is less than half the price of hand animation."

Regardless of the level of animation, the one thing that all of the studios interviewed here stress is the need for a quality script. All the technology in the world will come to nought if the dialogue is leaden and absurd.

"The reality is we aren't telling great stories yet," explains Starkenburg. "It's not really about the ability to get good motion-capture, it's about writing and direction. But it would be frustrating for a great director to come to games if he was unable to project his vision. So if our technology becomes more available, they will invest more in the front-end of actually getting these great performances."

Be it using markers or video-capture, recorded as a full performance or in disparate sessions, the technology is there to produce the data developers need to create convincing movement. The next step is working out how to move the player.





The art of *Twilight Princess* captures the light/dark duality in a way the game itself sometimes struggles to. As Aonuma explains, perhaps the execution didn't live up to the concept



THE LEGEND OF ZELDA LINKS TO THE PAST

He designed Ocarina Of Time's dungeons, and has directed every major Zelda title since. We speak to Eiji Aonuma about his memories of one of gaming's greatest franchises

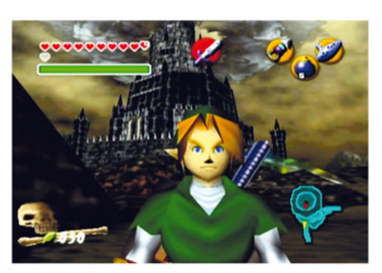
The story goes that Shigeru Miyamoto had his eye on **Eiji Aonuma** ever since the younger man's interview. He turned up toting a mechanical doll, the final project from his course at the Tokyo National University of Fine Arts and Music, which must have reminded Miyamoto of his own interview, when he faced Hiroshi Yamauchi armed only with animal coathangers and toy designs. After a brief apprenticeship, Aonuma was quickly working on *The Legend Of Zelda: Ocarina Of Time*, rose to the position of director on *Majora's Mask* and, barring Capcom's Game Boy Color *Oracle* games, has been in charge of every *Zelda* since. We asked him about Link's past, present and future adventures.

What was your first ever involvement with the *Zelda* series?

Immediately after joining Nintendo, right after graduating from art school, Nintendo launched *The Legend Of Zelda: A Link To The Past* – so my first encounter with *Zelda* was not as a designer but as a player. That was the first *Zelda* game I played. I was really impressed, especially with the potential I saw – I realised that the game was doing many things I did not think videogames could do. That was the game that gave me the framework for how I think about videogames. And, after that, purely due to my wish to make something similar, I was put in charge of making a game called *Marvelous* – unfortunately that was only available in Japan and not overseas. Mr Miyamoto saw my game and approached me and said: "Come on, if you want to make this type of game, why don't you try the real thing? We're making the new *Zelda* game." And it was *Ocarina Of Time*.

How long did it take you to say yes?

Actually, at that time Nintendo was preparing to launch the Nintendo 64 and my own role was







From top: *Ocarina Of Time*, the N64 masterpiece that was also Aonuma's first involvement with the series; *Majora's Mask*, Aonuma's first game as director; *The Wind Waker*, the breathtakingly beautiful GameCube quest set on the waves

not to make my own videogames but to work with external developers – I think I was working in Scotland at the time. I was working with second and third parties, and here was the chance to be involved with making my own game. And it was the new *Zelda* game! It took no time at all for me to say yes, of course.

What were your responsibilities during *Ocarina Of Time*'s development?
With *Ocarina* I was mainly responsible for the dungeon design – I had been at art school learning design and part of the course was to work with 3D objects. These were all sorts of things, and I became fascinated with the relationship between architecture and 3D shapes. Not only that, but I was working with mechanical design inside 3D objects, which I guess you might relate to how *Ocarina*'s dungeons work. When we first came to make *Ocarina*, of course, the N64 was an incredible machine to be working with. Its graphics capabilities were far beyond what I had previously been used to. And so these things allowed the dungeons to take the shapes they did.

"The Nintendo 64 was an incredible machine to be working with. Its graphics capabilities were far beyond what I had previously been used to"

Did you think that the elements of *A Link To The Past* would work so well in 3D?
No, I had absolutely no idea that so many of the original ideas would work in 3D! *A Link To The Past* was such a superb game and so well made that to just think it would work in 3D… it's a big change. Everything came together so neatly in *A Link To The Past*. But it turned out that many of the elements also worked well in 3D. Maybe Mr Miyamoto planned it that way, but I was surprised!

Your first *Zelda* game as director was *Majora's Mask*, which followed directly from *Ocarina*. Were you responsible for the darker tone of the game?
I hope you're not suggesting I'm a person who secretly harbours dark thoughts! [Laughs] I think the main reason they're so different is that they were made by the same team using the same tools and on the same machine. We had to change from *Ocarina*. The background to how we came up with *Majora's Mask*, and why it is the same Link, is all to do with *Ocarina*. When we were thinking of the next game we thought of what we'd done in *Ocarina*, and one system in the game was the ability to control the time of day and other things within the gameworld that depended on that. We thought we could extend this. So the first thing we decided was that this new game would go beyond one day, and that you would not just be controlling the time but also controlling the other characters within the world. The mechanic was now not just affecting the player. That was the starting point.

Why did using that system create the darker tone?
OK, so we wanted to use the time-control mechanism from the *Ocarina Of Time* engine, and alongside that we wanted to create a very complex world, instead of a huge one, that can provide the player with a number of different experiences. So we decided first of all to have the game take place over three specific days. And games are always telling you the world will end if you don't do this or that – we thought that the world really should end after three days.

So what can actually end the world? There's a question! It made us think of big things, and we thought of something very huge – the moon floating in the sky. Of course, the story is that the moon will crash into the world after three days: you know just from that that this is an extraordinary world. Yet the people who live there cannot understand their fate, which is a tragedy of its own kind. Only Link, or the player, is aware of the world's fate, and that kind of background gives a very dark edge to the player's role.

The people live their own lives over this time, and they see their own world, so it's quite natural that Link moves in and out of these orbits while on his own quest. Now, if we return to the time-control mechanism, you understand. With control over time you can rewind and watch everything happen again – and, if you are a hero, change it.

There's also the system built around the masks, which was the biggest mechanical and aesthetic departure for the series, particularly with regard to things like the jarring screams when Link puts on a mask.
I can't remember how the sound team did that noise. Now that I think about it, it is a bit crazy! But that's what it should be, because putting on those masks hurts. I remember, looking back, what happened was that we knew it must be scary, but the fact is the artists who designed the scenery and the world tried to make it more and more terrifying. So Link morphs into somebody else or something else by wearing masks. But he really does not want to wear these masks. The masks for Link are a painful change – this is not something he wants to do. But he has to. He has to. That's a big difference, and because it's against his will our artists wanted to express the agony of having to do this. And just returning briefly to what I said earlier about wanting to make something different from *Ocarina*, at the deepest level our artists had this desire to get rid of shared characteristics, and perhaps this means they got carried away too much.

Of course, they didn't get carried away on their own! It's a videogame, so it's easily done for any character to morph into another – that's so easy, with a single click of the button you can do that. So just having the masks wasn't unique, we thought. Especially because these masks are not ordinary masks, but are actually possessed by the spirits of dead people. So that's why, in order to emphasise a change or show what kind of mask it is, these kind of expressions are necessary for the moment. And in the back of the whole thing there is always the skull kid,



who's weird and creepy, and you're not really sure what or who he is – but he has Majora's Mask. It's a very, very important role, and he's scary and rather dirty, so together I think that the game has gained a very darkish image.

Then, with *The Wind Waker*, things got very bright. The remarkable visual style that game introduced was another big change – why did the team feel the need for such a departure?
At that time, we knew the hardware for the next *Zelda* would be the GameCube, and the first thing you think of is trying to come up with the best possible idea to take advantage of the technology. From that thinking, changing the graphical style, and how we represented the most basic elements of the game, emerged as one of the main themes. At the same time, outside of Nintendo, cel-shading was starting to become more widespread in the world of computer graphics, and we started to review and analyse if cel-shading technology would ever be suitable for *Zelda*.

But it was exactly the moment when we decided the hero in the next *Legend Of Zelda* adventure should be a child Link that we also decided the cel-shading would be the most appropriate way to go. Because when we wanted to realise the small Link, we wanted to depict the very cheerful side of his character – the little distortions in animations that are telling – and we wanted to do this with the other characters as well. We saw in Japanese animation ideas about how this could be done.

That was why we first started working with the cel-shading style. And during the course of development we came to understand that toon-shading suited the type of *Zelda* game in which you play as the child Link character. And there were other things – for example, when Link is

This distinctive art, produced in a style unlike anything else Nintendo has produced for other *Zelda* games, features four Links, as well as Majora's mask itself



Eiji Aonuma has a few more grey hairs nowadays, but he remains as sharp as a knife and is always engaging – and engaged – when talking about his work on the *Zelda* series

sailing in his boat on the ocean, cel-shading allowed it to look better than a so-called photorealistic visual style. With a photorealistic style you have to draw the details inside the water, because sea water is supposed to be semi-transparent. And just to show the semi-transparent ocean with a lot of detail below the surface takes a huge amount of processing power – I'd rather have the colour and the suggestion than unnecessary details that don't suit *The Wind Waker*'s style. And so that combination of being able to show friendship and expression easily, as well as things like making it not necessary to show what's happening inside of the ocean, meant that cel-shading fitted the game and the world perfectly.

Zelda games have always been great adventure games – would be fair to say that _The Wind Waker_ was the first _Zelda_ game that's an exploring game as well?
Well, to me, *Zelda* has always been an exploration game. You believe that you know everything – but you are wrong. In the worlds we choose to create, there is always something hidden somewhere that you are unaware of, and where you can find out new things, explore something for yourself. It is a very pleasant type of surprise. That's how it works, and that's one of the reasons why we wanted to set the ocean as a stage for Link to explore in *The Wind Waker*, and the same was true in *Phantom Hourglass*, and now for *Spirit Tracks*. The games share a similar concept, which encourages Link and the player to explore.

How does the experience change between making a game with child Link and making a game with adult Link?
In *The Legend Of Zelda* we want to show the main character, the player's character, growing up. Child Link appears to be very inappropriate for the role of Hero of Time – you are a child, and nobody thinks you are going to be the eventual hero at all, and you yourself cannot believe that you are going to grow up to be the hero. But, like it or not, you are now set on an adventure and must encounter a lot of the

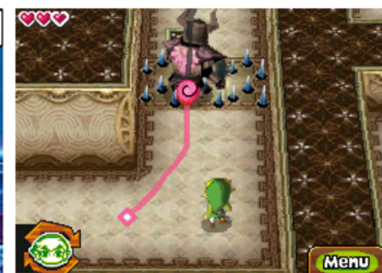


The critical standing of _Twilight Princess_, the Wii launch title and GameCube swansong, has taken a dive post-release, but it's perhaps due a more sober reappraisal – watch this space

Phantom Hourglass introduced Link's roguish companion Linebeck, a cowardly and well-written pirate on the hunt for treasure. We prefer venturing forth on our lonesome, though







From left: *Four Swords*, the pioneering and quite brilliant GameCube and GBA link-up title, which we pray every night will be released on DSiWare; *Phantom Hourglass*, possibly the finest DS hour for Nintendo in terms of adapting traditional design to fit the platform and interface; *Spirit Tracks*, which is yet another pocket classic, keeps the tricks of *Phantom Hourglass* and adds a few of its own

troubles and overcome them. And, in the end, if a person with a small body like a child has to encounter the enemy and can eventually beat the enemy, that is going to show how you have grown. So if you are going to emphasise the process of growing up, showing the child Link is actually very appropriate. That's why we use the child Link for *The Wind Waker*, *Phantom Hourglass* and *Spirit Tracks*.

In the case of *Ocarina Of Time* it was rather different, for we showed both the child Link and the adult Link, yet we were able to show both of the characters growing in their own way. From that perspective, *Twilight Princess* was a little different. In *Twilight Princess*, Link is already an adult from the very beginning – but that's because of the setting, which is darkish from the outset. If, at the beginning of the game, Hyrule was a pleasant land and eventually became that darkish world, the situation might have been different. But because we started from the darkish Hyrule, rather than showing how Link is growing up, in a way we wanted to show the difference from the other *Zelda* games. Link is already the adult, which shows that Link is already grown in certain respects at that time. It's a different challenge. So, yeah, what can I tell you about adult Link versus small Link? It depends on what kind of world we'd like to present to the game players – what feeling we want the players to have.

Twilight Princess was in some ways the most epic Zelda, certainly in terms of scale, but it's often compared unfavourably to the other games in the series – in hindsight, do you think that's fair?
For *Twilight Princess*, like I said, we used the adult Link, and one of the interesting things about that was how we considered the precise proportions of Link and the world. The scale is because we aimed for a more realistic quality in the size of the environments of Hyrule and what Link faced. But the question is whether or not we were able to incorporate any and all of the interesting game ideas that were able to take advantage of that kind of sheer grand scale within the *Zelda* universe. I am afraid that, no, we were definitely not able to do all the things that perhaps with hindsight we had the capabilities to do.

With that as the starting point, we are now developing the Wii version of *Legend Of Zelda*. And in the case of *Spirit Tracks* it was relatively easy, because regardless of the actual proportions between the player character and the other objects, we can simply concentrate upon the many game ideas we want to realise. But in the case of trying to depict a relatively photorealistic three-dimensional world, we have to be very careful to adapt the ideas so that they seem to perfectly fit with that world. I must admit that's actually one of my very greatest regrets with regard to *Twilight Princess*.

"My strongest personal attachment is to Ocarina Of Time. That game was something really special for me – it was the first Zelda game I worked on"

When the *Zelda* team comes to make a new adventure, it has to have a boomerang, it has to have a hookshot, it has to have a sword and other common elements – is that constricting or in any way liberating?
Sometimes we utilise the same items, and sometimes not. In every *Zelda* game we create new items. But that is a fair question, and it actually depends. In the case of *Spirit Tracks*, for example, we are utilising the boomerang once again, which can be manipulated by drawing a line on the touchscreen with the stylus. So even when we are utilising an item or idea, if we cannot come up with a new way of using it, then we should definitely say no – it's not final, it's not unique, it's not good enough for *Zelda*. So we should consider another idea instead.

As long as we can come up with some great new ideas for taking advantage of the existing item or system, then it is something we will seriously consider. If we can use something familiar in a new way then that makes the game much more interesting, so we are going to do that. After all, that might be much easier for players because with the previous version they already know the basics of how to play and how to manipulate a certain item. So the point here is how players might feel about those elements of the original system, and that is combined with us really having to think about and ask ourselves if adapting that old idea is going to give us a great game experience, and one that hasn't been used before. We don't just use stuff for convenience.

For you personally, what's the most special game in the *Legend Of Zelda* series?
Thank you very much for that excellent question. You know why we're talking – you're not stupid! I should say that *Spirit Tracks* is the title I can be most proud of as of now, and I have the confidence that I can say to anybody – including those who have never played with *Zelda* at all – that you should play *Spirit Tracks*.

Well, so much for the PR! I know that does not answer what *Zelda* fans expect to hear from me. My strongest personal attachment is to *Ocarina Of Time*. That game was something really special for me. It was the first *Zelda* title I worked on, it was the first title to create a three-dimensional universe for *The Legend Of Zelda*, and I was a single developer and was able to learn an awful lot from being involved in such a hugely talented development team. I have so many feelings within myself, even though I cannot specifically say what kind of feelings they are, but I still have a strong personal attachment to *Ocarina*. Even today, whenever I am making new *Zelda* games, what we did on *Ocarina Of Time* can sometimes give me feedback on what we're doing now.


SONY
Wii

THE BEST OF 2000-2009*

THE WINNERS FROM GAMING'S GREATEST DECADE, INCLUDING INDUSTRY AND **EDGE** READER PICKS

Here are the awards for a decade of endeavour: ten years of wonderful games and new ways to play them, with all the usual caveats that taking a discrete chunk of time and considering it emblematic entails. But the years 2000 to 2009 lend themselves unusually well to such treatment.

It was the decade that finally separated the old firm of Nintendo and Sega, as one took the blows and reinvented itself beyond recognition, while the other withdrew from hardware entirely and became a thirdparty developer. It was the decade that seemed to belong to Sony, with its PS2 smashing all-comers, before hubris caused a face-first fall from grace from which the company is still in the process of recovering. It was the decade that saw Microsoft making its debut with Xbox, a name that encapsulated its gruesome aesthetics and sheer grunt, a console that lost possibly billions of dollars but gave the company a crucial foothold in the market. And it was the decade of the PC, as technologies like Flash and companies like Playfish and PopCap made developers and gamers out of anyone.

The years 2000 to 2009 were when gaming finally became 'normal'. The stereotype of anti-social nerds is still dragged out every so often, but nowadays it tends to be with more affection. From *Diner Dash* to *Halo* to *Ico* to *Peggle* to *Wii Sports* to World Of WarCraft, the common theme here is this: everyone's playing. Your grandmother having a lash at Wii bowling isn't just funny, it's profound. Gaming is now the hobby of countless hundreds of millions the world over, and the revolution feels good.

So, as the Prince of All Cosmos lends a helping hand, let's get to the gongs and the arguments, as we give credit to the companies, games, people and hardware that made the decade what it was. Let us know what you think of our take on these ten years. The next decade certainly has a hell of a lot to live up to…

*OK, and a handful of the worst, too







GAME OF THE DECADE: WINNER

WORLD OF WARCRAFT

FORMAT: **MAC, PC** PUBLISHER: **ACTIVISION BLIZZARD**
DEVELOPER: **BLIZZARD** RELEASE: **2004**

The 1990s' most profound development was the rise of the firstperson shooter, but the ascendancy of the massively multiplayer game is a post-millennial phenomenon of far greater significance. *World Of WarCraft* is responsible, almost singlehandedly raising this once-obscure genre from the doldrums of nerdy obsession to one of the most popular expressions of the medium. This, despite the fact that it has goblins.

But it's not just *WarCraft*'s popularity that underscores its significance: by leading the expansion and evolution of the MMOG space, the game has been at the forefront of a shift in how we play. It has overseen and largely determined the transformation of gaming into a broad social activity, one that encompasses many different behaviours, often driven by the players themselves. A game that is necessarily online all of the time, *World Of WarCraft*'s ability to conjure competition, co-operation and community would not have been possible on such a scale in any previous era; this is the one genre which has benefited most from the proliferation of the internet, but within it, no other game has adapted with such assiduous efficiency and foresight.

Adaptation is, in fact, the other part of the story: *WOW* defines a change in gaming habits, but this is itself part of a wider change in how we consume media – not as individual packages pulled from a shelf, but as services, always evolving to meet the needs of their growing audiences. *WOW* has certainly done this, its expansions extending not just the game's content but the ambition behind it. Updates have seen the game sprawl into an all-devouring platform, hungrily absorbing ideas from elsewhere to be added to its own. *WarCraft Peggle* is just one minor novelty; early additions were matchmade competitive gametypes influenced by the instant action of shooters like *Battlefield*, recreating sieges and even beach assaults. A recent patch features a dungeon which looks to as unlikely a source as legendary Japanese shooter *Ikaruga* for inspiration.

The spread of online access is the most significant event in technology since the arrival of the home computer, and its effect on gaming is proving just as dramatic, transforming consumable items into perpetual social experiences. Does *WOW* have the capacity to be extended indefinitely? Certainly no other title is as likely to be the game of the next decade, too.



GAME OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

GRAND THEFT AUTO III

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **ROCKSTAR GAMES**
DEVELOPER: **ROCKSTAR NORTH** RELEASE: **2001**

Its sequels have consistently been among the biggest entertainment launches in videogame history – there is no doubt that *GTA*'s popularity and notoriety alone ensure it a place among the games of the decade. But underneath the Babel-like tower of units sold, underneath the tabloid-baiting controversies, *GTAIII* is a game of real importance. Rockstar's stated remit to outdo film came to the fore in *Vice City*, but the groundwork was laid out in *GTAIII*'s bustling cityscape of crime-caper crooks and Mafia men. But more vitally, Liberty City marked the birth of the open world. Though prodigiously copied, Rockstar remains the only developer with the vision to redefine the purpose of this technology with each game. And the real testament is this: though *GTAIII* was the starting point of Rockstar's ever-scaling ambition for this decade, it has remained the cap for most of its imitators.



GAME OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

HALF-LIFE 2

FORMAT: **360, PC, PS3, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **VALVE/ELECTRONIC ARTS**
DEVELOPER: **VALVE** RELEASE: **2004**

The FPS remains gaming's most popular genre; *Half-Life 2* was the game to shape its development, enabling the transformation from a bloody version of whack-a-mole to an emotionally involving and narratively sophisticated experience. Setting a benchmark for voice-acting and dialogue that lamentably few games have since matched, *Half-Life 2* created engaging, endearing characters who made the setting feel more alive and your role in it more purposeful. But its greater achievement, and one that is a triumph peculiar to this interactive visual medium, is in how it tells stories without words – via environments that, through the player's act of exploration, reveal the lives and deaths of their previous occupants. If, by the end of 2019, the firstperson perspective is no longer primarily used for shooting things, it will be *Half-Life 2* that truly inspired the possibility for it to do more.



GAME OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

HALO: COMBAT EVOLVED

FORMAT: **MAC, PC, XBOX** PUBLISHER: **MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS**
DEVELOPER: **BUNGIE STUDIOS** RELEASE: **2001**

If *Half-Life 2* did much to define what the firstperson shooter could aspire to be, then *Halo* established how it should work. A tour de force of mechanical execution, it not only put to bed any argument over the viability of the console FPS, but it gave birth to conventions that now underpin the genre on any platform. A recharging shield is just one of many brilliantly efficient notions here, alongside '30 seconds of fun', the two-weapon loadout, instant melee attacks and grenades that don't need to be equipped to be thrown. It's not their individual promise or novelty but their combination that makes *Halo* a peerless shooter, its supreme confidence in its gross mechanics paving the way for Bungie's later innovations with multiplayer and community. But its legacy extends further: perhaps no other game could have singlehandedly made Microsoft's console ambitions so credible.



GAME OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

RESIDENT EVIL 4

FORMAT: **GAMECUBE, PC, PS2, WII** PUBLISHER: **CAPCOM**
DEVELOPER: **IN-HOUSE** RELEASE: **2005**

***Resident Evil 4* was the end for the thirdperson adventure in the sense that no one, not even the designers working at Capcom itself, knew where to go after it. For devotees, you need only list the moments. Defending the shack with Luis. El Gigante. Sniping from above as Ashley's chased by cultists. A fully upgraded Red-9. The merchant. The minecart. Krauser. The midget and his right hand. That first meeting with a ganado, the first time in years you'd emptied a clip out of fear. Invisible insects. The lake. The chainsaw man. The regenerators. It. Writhing in a cage of torment, my friend. *Resident Evil 4* is a Fabergé egg, sure, as recherche as it is magnificent, but utterly peerless within that. Not as influential or successful as the other games on this list, it is nevertheless a masterpiece in a way none of them are. It's all game, all of the time, and about as perfect as it could be.**

PLAYSTATION 2

Dependable, unpredictable, global and inescapable: how could it not be the decade of PlayStation 2? With 138 million units sold and almost 2,000 games delivered, it's the console that sustained the brand, now a byword for videogames with parents, politicians, advocates and critics. Few of whom were interested, of course, until its power and influence gave them little choice. Steering games towards the centre of popular culture, it set its sights on the living room as well, adding a new buzzword to the industry's vocabulary: convergence.

Built to share brochures and cabinets with the most expensive Sony hardware, PS2 marked a complete break from console design tradition, swapping the portable-grill looks of its predecessor for something disguised and utilitarian, more like an industrial supercomputer than an entertainment device. It wasn't a comparison lost on Sony's marketing department, the pre-launch hype machine encouraging – maybe even creating – urban myths about export bans and ominous military potential. The Emotion Engine processor was compared to those of Intel and AMD, marking an audacious shift in horizons, a legitimate leap in power, and a brash new era for videogame PR.

To the uninitiated, the wealth of licensed tech emblazoned on the casing would only add to the confusion. An affordable DVD player supporting DTS and Dolby Digital sound, progressive-scan video and anamorphic widescreen, PS2 put movie and game technology in such close proximity that it was only a matter of time before they bred. And, as games like *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons Of Liberty* proved the potential, the industries themselves began to merge – to the point where we're all a bit tired of talking about it.

But there was one 'myth' Sony was quick to deny: that PS2 was a wretched machine to make games for. It was. With tremendous horsepower and aggressively new architecture geared solely to the running of 3D games, it presented developers with a mountain to climb. Unlike Xbox – named, tellingly, after DirectX – this is true console hardware, weirder in the short-term but stronger in later years. And that, of course, holds the key to its incredible longevity. A natural slow-burner, PS2 has churned out better and better games for the last ten years, the likes of *God Of War*, *Shadow Of The Colossus* and *Final Fantasy XII* met with awe and incredulity.

Without the support of redesigns, price drops, marketing drives, early online features, commitment to SCE's global studio network and fierce pursuit of thirdparty exclusives, who knows what gaming could have lost? Would Ueda and Kojima have been spurred to create their masterpieces? Would *GTA* have had the time and means to become what it has? Would any other platform have seen such cross-pollination of eastern and western culture and technique, and would the fruits have been given so proudly to the world?

PS2 has proved time and again the benefit of long-term strategy and design, and is rightly the most successful videogame console in history. Its philosophy, more than any motion controller or camera, might yet be the making of PlayStation 3.





HARDWARE OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

DS

Who's laughing now? The general reaction when Nintendo first unveiled the 'third pillar' of its hardware strategy was either amused tolerance or befuddlement. But its DS was the first, and in certain ways the most successful, product of 'new' Nintendo, the company as comfortable with cooking guides as goombas.

Everything comes down to the word Nintendo used in its worldwide marketing: touch. An interface that encouraged rather than alienated was combined with software that cajoled rather than threatened, and the success of this strategy is clear. *Brain Training* and *Nintendogs* were the advance force, both of which simply wouldn't work with buttons, and both of which are yet to be bettered in their niche: another example of Nintendo making the software that lets its hardware shine.

Then there are the delightful toys like Pictochat, the software library which now stands in the multiple thousands, and the constant rush of new ideas that the 'Developer's System' inspires. Never mind the brilliant redesigns: first the Lite, which arguably remains the defining DS model, then the DSi, which shows Nintendo's knack for telling tweaks, then the DSi XL, an admirably practical revision for the older audience the console tempted into using it.

Do we need to mention sales figures? Suffice it to say that in March this year Nintendo shipped its 100-millionth system, and by the end of the year will likely have reached the 120 million mark, with no signs of slowing down soon. If we take off the rose-tinted specs for a moment, it's clearly the greatest handheld there's ever been in gaming – and the most persuasive argument yet that good things come in small packages.

HARDWARE OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

WII

As GameCube was released, Nintendo was internally combusting. Despite the console's ability to hold its own, the company's designers knew they couldn't compete with Microsoft and Sony in an endless struggle for graphical superiority and processing grunt: that was, after all, exactly what had done for longtime rival Sega. Nintendo's next home console would change the game. Has there ever been a more appropriate codename than Revolution?

Iwata first waved the Wii Remote at 2005's Tokyo Game Show, and for a brief moment it felt like the world changed. Everyone imagined something different, but Wii delivered something for everyone, whether it was that first swing in Wii Tennis, the underarm curl of Wii Bowling or just cutting loose in Wii Boxing. It wasn't just motion-sensing that got the Remote into hands worldwide, though, it was the fact that it was in the familiar shape of a TV remote.

The console's sleek design, low price-point and emphasis on fun may have got it into homes, but it was the easily navigable menus and non-threatening software that got it magical word-of-mouth recommendations that almost instantly saw the little white box flying off shelves. A word, too, for Nintendo's use of online: WiiConnect 24 seems like such a small thing next to PSN and Xbox Live, but the steady tickers of news and weather, alongside clever touches like Everybody Votes and early adoption of the BBC's iPlayer, make it a charming service.

Just over three years in, and in sales terms Wii outpaces the comparable PS2 figures, while PS3 and Xbox 360 fight it out for a distant second place. It's easy to be blasé about it now, but if Wii hadn't been a success, Nintendo could have dropped out of home consoles to focus on handheld. It is the company of the big three that genuinely believes in taking risks, and it put its future on the line to do so.



INDUSTRY OPINION

CLINT HOCKING, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, UBISOFT MONTREAL

GAME OF THE DECADE
"The decade was over before it began: my game of the decade was launched on Oct 22, 2001. Without question it was *Grand Theft Auto III*, for embracing and empowering player agency in a freeform environment."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"The player. It's players who grew the size of the industry by an order of magnitude in the past decade, and it is their input into our games that has made them great. No single individual can match that accomplishment."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE



INDUSTRY OPINION

JASON KAPALKA, CO-FOUNDER AND CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER, POPCAP

GAME OF THE DECADE
"*Wii Sports*. It justified an entire console, torpedoed the invulnerable PlayStation, brought 'casual' gaming to everyone from five-year-olds to senior citizens, and will remain a blast at all tomorrow's parties."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"Steve Jobs. Though rumours have it he personally hates games, the iPhone has become the most interesting stealth game platform ever, and the App Store defines the shape of things to come for videogames in the next decade."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"A drunken midnight *Rock Band 2* session, finally beating Enter Sandman, complete with fog machine and disco lights. Maybe music games are a 'fad', but this proved videogames can reach out beyond their traditional boundaries and audience in a way no one could have imagined a decade ago."

INDUSTRY OPINION

RON CARMEL, CO-FOUNDER, 2D BOY

GAME OF THE DECADE
"I'm probably in a large crowd for saying this, but *Portal* was it for me. I've yet to play another game that fused story and gameplay so well and into such a dense little bundle of joy."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"The launch of Steam *Half-Life 2*. Until then, none of the big players dared piss off the Walmarts of the world by cutting them out of the sales chain. I think Steam was the first nail in the coffin of retail game sales."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"Simon Carless? That man has probably done more for the growth of indie games than anyone, and I don't think too many people are aware of it."

INDUSTRY OPINION

PETER MOLYNEUX, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, MICROSOFT GAME STUDIOS EUROPE

GAME OF THE DECADE
"*Half-Life 2* was the game to show us all what great gameplay, great drama set in a great world would feel like. It became a benchmark for everyone in the industry."

PEOPLE OF THE DECADE
"Bill Gates and Steve Jobs. I think of them as being the leading lights who continue to push the boundaries of our technology and the way we interact with it, continually reinventing and improving what we do."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"The explosion of social networking such as Bebo and Facebook, which has changed our relationship with technology and each other in ways we could not have imagined."



DEVELOPER OF THE DECADE: WINNER

NINTENDO

Long patronised as the House of Mario, a Willy Wonka factory where every title that emerged was likely to look like it had been crafted from cotton candy and pear drops, Nintendo is now caricatured as the turncoat home of the Wii Remote and its infuriating imprecisions, as a creator of nothing more than lifestyle software and games for granny.

That in itself is an achievement, of course, and a gigantic one. Without putting a foot wrong, Nintendo quietly did what all other platform holders had strategically decided was impossible: open gaming up for an astonishingly diverse audience with smart titles like *Dr Kawashima's Brain Training* and *Nintendogs*. But the company has done so much more besides, from reinventions of its classic brands in games such as *Super Mario Galaxy*, *Metroid Prime* and *The Wind Waker* (as likely a candidate for the most beautiful game ever made as any) to youthful, energetic oddities like *Cubivore* and *WarioWare*. When it comes to indie titles, *Electroplankton* and *Bit Generations* are as effortlessly nuanced and unexpected as anything being dreamt up by boutique teams or the XNA crowd, while the company often attacked for its relentless profiteering is also willing to unleash babbling madcap generosity on its audience in the form of throwaway delights like Wii's Everybody Votes channel and DSi's stunning Flipnote Studio, without asking for a single penny in return.

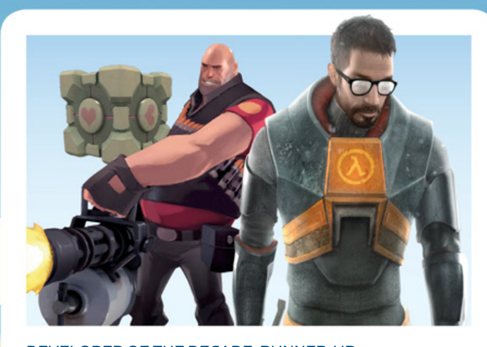
Nintendo isn't the developer of the decade just because it was the first to get your in-laws chatting about videogames over dinner, then. It's the developer of the decade because it's consistently the first in almost every aspect of gaming: a fearless, yet strangely self-effacing, innovator with a knack for presenting the fruits of its least-likely experiments in a form that almost everyone can appreciate.



DEVELOPER OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

ROCKSTAR NORTH

As *Grand Theft Auto* entered the new millennium, it was still a pleasantly ridiculous pinball spin-off with a pronounced skill for getting itself into the pages of the Daily Mail. Ten years on and it has become a genuine cultural landmark, a synthesis of virtual geography and cinematic storytelling that has all but singlehandedly created the decade's most alluring and problematic genre, the open-world game. Far from a one-trick pony, beyond the limits of Liberty City Rockstar North remains hard at work prodding at society's pressure points with titles like *Manhunt*, the most satisfying and thoughtful prolonged exploration of the link between violence and entertainment yet seen in the industry. Capable of both a deep, brooding seriousness and bursts of stunt-happy idiocy, like all the best developers Rockstar North creates trends rather than follows them, and in the process of doing so, it sets standards that few other teams can match.



DEVELOPER OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

VALVE

Portal sent puzzlers into the quantum age, *Left 4 Dead* turned the apocalypse into a bona fide sport, and *Half-Life 2* made physics a meaningful and entirely essential part of all games. Despite all that, Valve's place on this list is ultimately as much a result of its designs on the marketplace as its exacting standards for individual titles. After significant birth pains, the company's Steam platform has provided a vital sense of unity to PC games, delivering a seamless means of sales, patching and DLC delivery, while creating a community for players that is far more than a simple marketplace, and a set of tools for developers that significantly cut down production bottlenecks. Rivals are understandably concerned at the monopolistic endgame suggested by such a fiercely comprehensive service, but Valve's ever-growing audience is too busy revelling in the developer's unprecedented generosity, the free updates for its own games seemingly never running dry.

PUBLISHER OF THE DECADE: WINNER

NINTENDO

This citation doesn't risk becoming a list: it has to be a list. The decade that began with Nintendo on the back foot and ended with it on top can only begin to be understood by the sheer breadth and depth of software, both its own and thirdparty, the company brought to market. The ten years have seen the Kyoto giant change utterly, hunkering down around its bread-and-butter classics while simultaneously breaking through to a wider audience that for many others remains an abstract.

The early 2000s saw the dying years of the N64, an Indian summer of sorts thanks to *Majora's Mask*, *Perfect Dark* and *Sin & Punishment* alongside the telling experiment of *Hey You, Pikachu!* The GameCube hardware had a muted start next to this, but by 2004 it had played host to *Pikmin* and its sequel, *Cubivore: Survival Of The Fittest*, *The Wind Waker* and *Four Swords Adventures*, next to the often brilliant fruits of Nintendo's new thirdparty relationships: Retro Studios and the *Metroid Prime* series, Silicon Knights with *Eternal Darkness: Sanity's Requiem* and Sega with *F-Zero GX*. There was even room for peripheral-led rhythm-action games in *Donkey Konga* and the peerless *Jungle Beat*.

And what is there to say about its Wii software lineup except that, until recently at least, Nintendo got it absolutely right? Many consider *Wii Sports* the greatest pack-in game of all time, then there's the peripheral-boosted *Wii Play*, dismissed by gamers for its simplicity but lapped up by a new and eager audience for just that reason, as well as the superlative *Super Mario Galaxy*. *Mario Kart Wii* took the series to a new audience, while alongside the *Wii Fits*, *Musics* and *Chess* were considered experiments like *Endless Ocean*, hardcore love-ins like *Captain Rainbow*, and rejiggings of classics in the form of *Metroid Prime Trilogy* and the New Play Control series.

As for portables, the GBA list includes *Advance Wars*, *Mario Kart Super Circuit*, *Golden Sun*, the *Mario & Luigi* series, *Metroid Fusion* and *Zero Mission*, *Fire Emblem*, *The Minish Cap*, *WarioWare*



Twisted, the *Pokémons*, *Mother 3* and the untouchable *Art Style* series. DS? Pictochat, *Daigasso! Band Brothers*, *WarioWare: Touched!*, *Yoshi's Touch & Go*, *Advance Wars: Dual Strike*, *Nintendogs*, *Another Code*, *Animal Crossing: Wild World*, *Ouendan*, *Jump Ultimate Stars*, *Brain Training*, *Planet Puzzle League*, *Phantom Hourglass*, *Personal Trainer Cooking*, 100 Classic Book Collection and *Professor Layton* (outside of Japan). And other companies dream of publishing things like *Electroplankton*.

Nintendo was a slow starter online, but the experimental side is beginning to dominate. WiiWare has the *Art Style* games nestling neatly alongside offbeat brilliance like *Maboshi: The Three Shape Arcade*, *Bonsai Barber* and *You, Me And The Cubes*. DSiWare has its own *Art Style* games, and the simple genius of something like Flipnote Studio. This has been a list, and it couldn't have been anything else: Nintendo is the publisher of the decade for peerless quality, and incredible breadth.



PUBLISHER OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

ACTIVISION BLIZZARD

Activision began in 1979 as the first ever thirdparty publisher and ended the 2000s as one half of the world's biggest thirdparty publisher. Activision Blizzard CEO Robert Kotick's pastimes may include baiting fanboys and Sony, but he's also undoubtedly the most ruthless and successful businessman in the industry, overseeing a franchise-led strategy that has put the company at the very top of the thirdparty tree, and in a dominant position over its rivals.

That's not to say Activision Blizzard doesn't publish great games, because that's why it's here. The *Tony Hawk's* series saw its best moments in the 2000s, *Call Of Duty* has in six short years become the FPS to beat, there's *PGR*, the diversification of *Guitar Hero*, and the likes of *Spider-Man 2* and *Prototype*. Then there's the Blizzard half: *Diablo II*, *WarCraft III* and the paradigm-shifting *World Of WarCraft*. A stunning line-up.

It's too easy to paint Activison Blizzard as the big bad wolf. The truth is, it's a business in a franchise-led industry, and it's done a better job improving and maintaining its brands over the years than its thirdparty competitors. Who would be without *Modern Warfare*, *Geometry Wars* or *World Of WarCraft*? As the playlists and sales figures show, almost no one – and that's the highest praise you can give to a company in the entertainment business.



PUBLISHER OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

SONY

The biggest compliment you can pay Sony Computer Entertainment is that it's as comfortable with the avant-garde as it is with the blockbuster. Let's reel off the biggies first: *God Of War*, *Jak & Daxter*, *Ratchet & Clank*, *Resistance*, *SOCOM*, *Infamous*, *MLB: The Show* and the ever-reliable *Gran Turismo* series. SCE has the happy knack of pulling out a hit when it needs it most: in *Uncharted*, Naughty Dog produced a matinee moment and a credible system-seller that kept PlayStation 3 ticking over during the dark early days.

But most big publishers have their hits. SCE is here because it is the only publisher with a track record of innovation that bears comparison with Nintendo's. Its London Studio captured the mainstream imagination with *Singstar* and, to a lesser extent perhaps, *EyeToy*, as well as producing delightful distractions such as *EyePet*. Its Japan Studio gave PSP purpose with *LocoRoco* and *Patapon*. There's ThatGameCompany with *Flow* and *Flower*, Relentless and *Buzz!*, Media Molecule with *LittleBigPlanet*, From Software's *Demon's Souls* and Q-Games' excellent *Pixeljunk* series. And then Fumito Ueda and Team Ico, responsible for *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*, two of the most remarkable experiences gaming has yet produced.

It's this devotion to possibility as well as profit that makes SCE special, and it's an attitude that won't disappear soon.

INDUSTRY OPINION

KATSUHIRO HARADA, EXECUTIVE PRODUCER, TEKKEN 6

GAME OF THE DECADE
"I'd go for *Call Of Duty 4*. As I'm a creator in the sequel business, here is one game that has a very special meaning for me. I've been making *Tekken* for 15 years. Making a game into a series that can stand the test of time, meaning that will be still enjoyed after, say, a period of ten years, is very demanding in everyday study and such. But it's also proof of the quality of a development team. Keeping a series popular with a lot of users after ten years is an achievement. *Call Of Duty* goes back to the old days of *Medal Of Honor*, and *Call Of Duty 4* was able to capture the essence of today to keep it a blockbuster."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"I prefer to focus on a specific development team rather than a person. See, over the last ten or so years, teams have evolved from ten or a dozen to hundreds of people in size. Making games is no longer just about ideas, experience and know-how, but also about promotion and publishing. Because I give such importance to the relationship between the development team and its publisher, I just can't pick one man's name."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"It was obviously the launch of the PS2, which helped to support the idea of 'Game = Made in Japan'. But the fact is that about 15 years ago there were the first signs of the western counterattack that has led to today's overthrow of Japanese dominance over the industry. Thirteen years ago in **Edge**, I used to say things like, 'Made in Japan is over', because the Japanese industry was failing to develop a strong PC gaming market, and we are struggling now because of our lack of experience and development when it comes to technologies, engines and middleware. This made our market even more specific than ever, with all the blockbusters that sell so much worldwide finding few echoes in Japan. This has become so obvious in the last ten years, even during the PS2's long lifetime. The Japanese development community is struggling. However, should we succeed in surviving these harsh times, there is a chance we can get back on top."

INDUSTRY OPINION

GEORGE FAN, DESIGNER, PLANTS VS ZOMBIES, POPCAP

GAME OF THE DECADE
"*Katamari Damacy*. This game showed the world that simple yet unique games could still succeed in a climate where games were growing more complex and derivative."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"Satoru Iwata. The man reinvented Nintendo by giving us the DS and the Wii, two consoles that were incredibly successful for reasons other than graphics and processing power."

INDUSTRY OPINION

EVAN WELLS, CO-PRESIDENT, NAUGHTY DOG

GAME OF THE DECADE
"My game of the decade is *World Of WarCraft*. Over 11 million paid subscribers can't be wrong. The industry has never seen a game of this scale, and it's unlikely that we'll see another soon."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"I can't single out one person, so I'll say the people of the decade are the casual gamers. This decade has seen videogames graduate from a hardcore hobby for geeks to become something for everybody. From online Flash games to Facebook and iPhone games, and of course the home consoles, there's no doubt that gaming has hit the mainstream."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"The announcement of the Wii came as a complete shock to me. I thought the name was ridiculous and I never thought the motion controller would take off. I've since eaten my hat, and find myself playing the Wii as much as any other console."



PERSON OF THE DECADE: WINNER

SATORU IWATA

In its 120-year history, Nintendo has had only four presidents, and in 2002, when Satoru Iwata took up the reins, the company's future looked less inspiring than its often-dazzling past. Its GameCube console was trailing in third place in the console war, and there was a distinct impression that the Kyoto giant was on the wane.

Compared to predecessor Hiroshi Yamauchi, Iwata can seem like a less fearsome figure, but to confuse his sunnier demeanour for a lack of determination would be an error. In the space of just seven years, Yamauchi's surprise choice for a successor (after serving as president of HAL Laboratory, Iwata became Nintendo's head of corporate planning in 2000) has not just returned console gaming's most venerable brand to a position of dominance, he's conclusively rewritten the rules of the entire industry as well, mixing crowd-pleasing franchises with a range of games and peripherals that have reached out to entirely unexpected demographics.

It's a change that can be felt in every branch of videogaming as new audiences flood in and competitors – if Nintendo can even be said to have those at this point – struggle to come to terms with Iwata's new reality. In a decade that has seen many brilliant designers, producers and visionaries emerge, only one man has truly been responsible for pressing the button on a genuine revolution – and it's one which, for better or worse, will almost certainly shape the coming decade, too. Quietly effective where others are brash and scattershot – and often all but invisible behind Nintendo's superstar design mascot Shigeru Miyamoto – Satoru Iwata is a deep thinker, and a mild-mannered radical.



PERSON OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

SHINJI MIKAMI

There's *Resident Evil 4*, of course, which not only set new standards for survival-horror but managed to change expectations for action games as a whole. But that's just one game, and there are so many others. Although he remains less of a household name than a Hideo Kojima, a Shigeru Miyamoto or a Cliff Bleszinski, a look at the recent output of Shinji Mikami, formerly of Capcom and Clover Studio and now of Platinum Games, reveals a creative force in the midst of a blistering hot streak, from the deranged overdrive antics of *God Hand* to his stewardship of the astonishingly inventive Capcom Five (which turned out to be the Capcom Four following the spiking of *Dead Phoenix*). Probably still best known for his work with the Umbrella Corp, it's worth remembering that even Mikami's rare misses over the last decade have been fascinating exercises in diversity, with curates' eggs like balletic *Space Invaders* mutation *P.N.03* suggesting a mind always ready to examine existing ideas from unexpected angles.



PERSON OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

J ALLARD

The man who encouraged Microsoft to take the internet seriously is also the man who changed what people would expect from a game console, J Allard's vision for Xbox's Live service providing a level of integration and polish the rest of the industry is still scrabbling to match. Consoles had tangled uneasily with the internet since Nintendo put a modem port in the NES back in the early 1980s, but Allard ensured that, after the first Xbox, it became something that no hardware designer could choose to ignore, and it was an inclusion that, as much as *Halo*, gave the software giant's fledgling piece of videogame kit both a personality and a shot at survival. That would be enough, of course, but his other ideas have been pretty good too, with XNA, an attempt to create a unified, fuss-free dev platform that even bedroom coders can hack about in, potentially changing the way that even triple-A games are made in the years ahead. On a side note, his patronage of underground heroes like Jeff Minter doesn't hurt either.

FAILURE OF THE DECADE: WINNER

XBOX 360'S RED RING OF DEATH

How many other hardware failures are common enough to earn a nickname? If it's not quite the biggest foul-up in consumer electronics history, the reliability of Microsoft's Xbox 360 certainly takes the prize as the biggest ever in videogames. There were a number of faults with the console's original design, but the most common by far is the 'General Hardware Failure' indicated by three red lights: the fault is undoubtedly systemic, and allegedly comes down to a combination of insufficient testing resources and a rush to beat PlayStation 3 to market.

For a while there, if you bought an Xbox 360, chances were that at some point you would have to return it to Microsoft at for repair or replacement. The saga, and Microsoft's responses to it, can even be mapped on the classic Kubler-Ross five stages of grief. First, there was denial: from launch in 2005 until July 2007, Microsoft simply pretended the problem didn't exist. Needless to say, consumers weren't happy when the company claimed that disc-scratching problems were the fault of users, not the hardware, and the media began to investigate and quote inside sources.

Finally, in July 2007, the then-VP of Microsoft's interactive entertainment business, Peter Moore, wrote an open letter admitting that the problem existed. But this was bargaining rather than acceptance: it announced the creation of a billion-dollar warranty – an amount that would be reached if every Xbox 360 then sold required repair. And there were still conditions: initially this only applied to consoles that were less than three years old (although we have since been told that Microsoft will repair 360s with general hardware faults outside of this period for free).

The depression is ongoing among Microsoft shareholders and, more importantly, gamers who often have to wait three weeks while their console is yet again away for repair. And acceptance? There's none. It shouldn't be forgotten that Microsoft was dragged towards the announcement of its billion-dollar warranty after almost two years of failures, and the feeling persists that it was an initiative designed to head off class-action lawsuits rather than do customers a good turn.

The real tragedy of all this is that this decade has seen Microsoft make its entrance into the videogame console industry and gain an enormous amount of traction, its two Xbox consoles to date playing host to a succession of magnificent games, and its Xbox Live service proving itself to be among the most significant developments in videogaming history.

Without its hardware flaws, Xbox 360 would have deserved serious consideration in the Hardware of the Decade category. But thanks to the Red Ring of Death, and its grudging response to it, Microsoft's Xbox division still has a lot to prove to the people who matter – its routinely inconvenienced customers.





INDUSTRY OPINION

JOSEPH STATEN, WRITER & CREATIVE DIRECTOR, BUNGIE

GAME OF THE DECADE
"*World Of WarCraft*. The super-highway of game development is littered with the wreckage of would-be competitors, and not just because *WOW* is a terrific game; it's a thriving community with exceptional demographic diversity. All designers, regardless of genre, would be fools not to internalise the significance of Blizzard's social engineering triumph."

PERSON OF THE DECADE
"The player. Of course, I'd give the same answer for any decade. But I'd argue that the last ten years have seen huge progress – a major maturation of our desire, if not always our ability, to deliver experiences that immerse and invest players in their fun."

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"Sony fumbling the launch of PS3. When Bungie was still a firstparty developer for Microsoft, we were pretty worried about the PS3 crushing Xbox sales. But I don't think we were the only ones musing on the dangers of self-assurance as one of the world's premier entertainment companies squandered its market lead."



FAILURE OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

PLAYSTATION 3'S DIFFICULT LAUNCH

Until Nintendo's DS and Wii, PlayStation and PlayStation 2 were the breakout successes of the modern era, the latter indicating that Sony had a real chance of mainstream success with PS3. What did the company do? Well, it made a console so quirky and so expensive that it alienated developers as well as consumers. And then it decided to market it as an aspirational device rather than something appropriate for everyone.

In short, Sony's previously pitch-perfect marketing turned arguably the most anticipated console of all time into a bit of a joke. Its embarrassing E3 2006 conference birthed a series of memes, from Riiiiiiiiidge Racer to Enemy Crabs, while its 'This is Living' advertising managed the rare hat-trick of being condescending, obscure and tacky. When Sony Computer Entertainment chairman Kaz Hirai went on record saying that the system was intentionally difficult to develop for, it became clear that PlayStation 3's introduction was going to be tough.

And, for a while, Sony's marketing teams seemed determined to make a hash of everything, not just PS3. Remember the 'All I want for Xmas is a PSP' campaign (also known in certain circles as Worst Guerrilla Marketing Ever)?

Now that the PS3 hardware is more affordable and the emphasis has shifted to the expansive capabilities of the platform rather than its exclusive status, those early fumbles feel like they belong to another age. It was a time when Sony would make proclamations such as "The next generation begins when we say it does," one of the boldest statements ever made in the game industry – and perhaps the most over-confident.



FAILURE OF THE DECADE: RUNNER-UP

GIZMONDO

The Gizmondo handheld console didn't even last a year at retail, sold less than 25,000 units, and a conservative estimate would suggest that its parent company burned through $300m, 90 per cent of that figure in its final six months of existence. In essence, every person who bought one of the devices cost the company about $12,000 dollars. Who says maths is dull?

The Gizmondo story is a fascinating one from beginning to end. There's the involvement of co-founder Stefan Eriksson (a rather terrifying criminal type amusingly nicknamed 'Fat Steve' by the Swedish police), who managed to split a Ferrari Enzo in two on a California highway the same month his company's hardware was discontinued. There was the 'Smarts Adds' idea, which saw consumers paying less for the hardware in exchange for receiving adverts on their consoles, and which worked in theory but was never launched. And there was the flagship Gizmondo store on London's Regent Street, the lack of hardware supply to retailers, and the grand total of 14 games officially released for the machine in its lifetime.

The sad footnote is that the Gizmondo hardware is an interesting piece of design: its GPS and camera, for example, were cleverly integrated into several games (including an early augmented-reality experience) that were sadly shelved when the scale of the hardware's failure became clear. In May 2008, company co-founder Carl Freer announced plans for a Gizmondo 2 device, but the hardware hasn't surfaced to date.

INDUSTRY OPINION

KRISTIAN SEGERSTRALE, CEO, PLAYFISH

MOMENT OF THE DECADE
"I'm split between the launches of Nintendo Wii, iPhone, and the Facebook platform, as I believe all have brought gaming to the masses in entirely new ways. Having to choose, I'll pick the launch of the Facebook platform. In little more than two years Facebook have created a game platform that has grown to more than 250 million monthly active players – faster than any game platform has ever grown. And most of the people playing aren't even gamers. That's got to be the moment for me!"

YOUR PICKS OF THE DECADE

GAMES OF THE DECADE

"*Half-Life 2*. We've been hearing stories of how Earth's apocalypse will doom us all. With *Half Life 2* we finally had a chance to experience one such apocalypse with the added bonus of the gravity gun."
Karel Steutelings

"*World Of WarCraft*. Some may vote for flashes in the pan, but *World Of WarCraft* is the true game of the decade. Massive, engaging… and five years old. When the history of games is written, what will be the focus for the '00s? The entire *Call Of Duty* series is only a year older."
Rob Donald

"*We Heart Katamari*. In a decade when people are beginning to write off the Japanese industry, it's easy to forget that it hasn't been that long since we were introduced to Prince, King, and that fantastic sticky ball."
Martin Hollis

"*Resident Evil 4*. All of the ideas imagined in the head of a child whilst playing Ultimate Play The Game games in the early '80s, brought to life."
Lee Barklam

"*Metroid Prime*. It may have not been the prettiest game of its time, nor the least flawed, but when it comes to sheer atmosphere Prime remains unmatched. In terms of escapism and immersion in a videogame world, there is no game that has raised the bar higher since, and for that reason this is the crowning achievement of the decade."
Iain Critie



"*Super Mario Galaxy*. A great return to form for Mario in a near-perfect game. Audiovisuals to die for even on a comparatively underpowered console and innovation round every corner, but the best thing about the game? It was 100 per cent pure unadulterated fun with no pretension of being anything else."
Somsuddin Ali

"*Shenmue II*. Like all masterpieces before it, *Shenmue II* is an experience inexpressible with words. Epic yet intimate, dramatic yet wildly fun, *Shenmue II* combines astounding technical ambition with a delicate artistic touch. The final apotheosis is truly breathtaking."
Kieran Jessel

"*Halo: Combat Evolved*. While later versions refined what was here, the original really did have a jaw-dropping quality about it. Taking the very best bits of *Doom* and *GoldenEye*, and squeezing them together with a space opera storyline as grand as Star Wars, it put the Xbox on the gaming map, deservedly so."
Martin Kent

"*Halo 3*. In finishing the fight Bungie had perfected the formula that would forever land them amongst some of the greatest names in the industry. They earned their place in gaming history and the hearts of FPS fans and gamers the world over. Oh, and the musical score is unmatched."
Byron Kheroua

"*Halo*. It was so far ahead of anything else. The quantum leap forward in AI, graphics, polish, and fun was simply astounding for its time. The graphics and the AI hold up quite well. This is the kind of game that I can see myself playing through again many years from now. I think it will age like a truly classic silent film or a golden-age Hollywood spectacle."
Parodius



"*Shenmue*. Admittedly it was released in 1999 in Japan but most of us played it in 2000. *Shenmue* was the massive leap forward in scope, narrative and immersion we had been waiting years for and no game, before or since, has wowed me in quite the same way."
AgentCool

"The *Halo* series. It's difficult to fault and paved the way for many more to emulate. It really took a very long time for people to catch up and they are still trying to this day."
DCrappa

"*World Of WarCraft*. I haven't put so many hours into a game in my life: 1,500-ish (it scares me to look at that). The sense of community and just mucking about with my mates was fantastic. I have been *WOW*-free for six months now! One day at a time… One day at a time."
Darren McCoy

"*Halo*, it has to be *Halo*. The first game was the first game I ever really played co-op and the first FPS I played of that generation. *Halo 2* was an absolute staple for my second year at uni, then *Halo 3* came for third year, hours of fun watching my less than competent friend spinning around while looking up. Good times."
Ben Lathwell



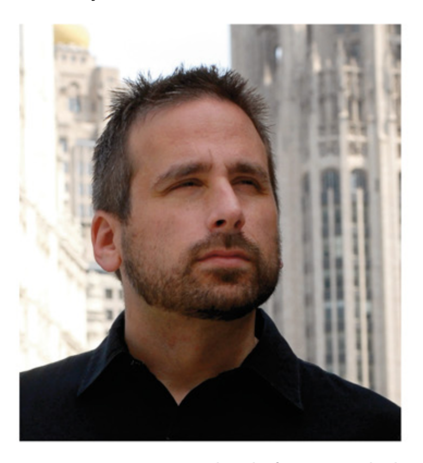
"*Rock Band 1* and *2*. Refined the rhythm game brilliantly and added the brilliant *RB* music store, so there is always something new to play. Not just a great game, but even greater with friends – which has given this more play time than anything else I can think of."
Steviepunk

PEOPLE OF THE DECADE

"Landing two of the greatest games in recent years, Fumito Ueda simply had to be the personality of this decade. The exact importance and influence of his work are yet to be revealed, but Ueda's output in the 2000s will definitely be remembered as groundbreaking moments in videogame history."
Kieran Jessel

"Satoru Iwata. Regardless of how you feel about the current direction of Nintendo it was this man that took over a struggling company and reversed its fortunes to such an extent that it returned to its position of dominance of the '80s even in the face of corporate giants Sony and Microsoft."
Peter Nolan

"Toshihiro Nagoshi. Most crime-writers and film-maker auteurs duck and dodge accusations of glamorisation and over-indulgence in the iconography of crims and their gangster-isms. Nagoshi grabs the nearest sun-bed, pair of tweezers and gold chain before keeping his profile low. On a throne. All hail Nagoshi: man, legend, light source."
David Valjalo



"Ken Levine. For masterminding the fantastic *BioShock* – an experience filled with enough atmosphere to make me feel more part of a game than I probably have in my 30+ years of gaming."
Oli

"Peter Molyneux. Can anyone talk as enthusiastically about games as Peter? He may promise more than can be delivered sometimes, but he seems to have a genuine desire to drive gaming forward. He may get ridiculed sometimes but the decade would have been much duller without him. I would rather listen to him get excited about games and features than some scripted PR release."
Marc Alderman

"My wife, for understanding all my late-night gaming 'nonsense'!"
Chris Armitage

"Satoru Iwata. I thought that turning around Nintendo's fortunes was almost impossible. Whatever you think of their new direction, Iwata deserves great credit for the bravery and imagination needed to move against the tide. The fact that all the consoles are introducing their take on the Wii's motion controls (albeit with extended functionality) and the Wii is copying no one speaks volumes."
Mooks

"Tim Sweeney and Mark Rein. Unreal tech is amazing for gamers, scripters and for content creators, and has been for a decade. Some good engines come and rival UE, but none have the history and client base that UE has."
Threeup

"Ken Levine. I read once that his intention with *BioShock* was something akin to revolutionising the medium. He didn't, but *BioShock* was the most mature and literary gaming venture of the last decade. Levine didn't just make objectivism a central theme, he made it intrinsic to the game's glorious environment. It seems a highly personal piece: an astonishing opening to Rapture, followed by many missteps thereafter, but exceptional harmony between theme and mechanics. Great vision."
Ambrus_Veres

"Goichi Suda. His games have an 'auteur' feel to them and I love how he has managed to incorporate such post-modern aesthetics and leftfield ideas into largely mainstream releases. He's one of the few people that convince me that major-release games aren't entirely doomed to a future of focus-tested generica."
TheHat13

"Fumito Ueda and Kenji Kaido. Backed up by their small development team, produced the most fantastical and wondrous games like *Ico* and *Shadow Of The Colossus*. They pushed hardware to the limit with an uncompromising artistic vision which will carry over to the next decade and into the future. Their games are the most prized in my collection."
Savagehenry

"Satoru Iwata: While *GTAIII*, Xbox, and PS3 are all about the hardcore, Iwata changed Nintendo's direction in favour of what would become the Wii. Say what you want about the Wii and its games, its influence is great. It's outselling Xbox and PS3 combined, shown that casual gamers is a market to be reckoned with, and is doing it all on nine-year-old hardware."
Aaron MC



"My person of the decade would have to be Greg Canessa, who worked at both Microsoft and PopCap games. He is largely credited with convincing MS to pursue XBLA, which in retrospect, kickstarted the small-developer downloadable game boom we all benefit from today. His success at PopCap simply continued his efforts to transform a genre (casual games) that many hardcore gamers sneered at derisively into one that is widely praised today."
Grognard66

MOMENTS OF THE DECADE

"There's probably a hundred and one things that I'm forgetting but at this moment nothing can rival that bathroom moment in *Eternal Darkness*. I came very close to shitting my pants after that scream, and the brief change in horror style hit me like a lorry."
Alexander Davies

"*Braid*'s ending. I mean, Jesus, what kind of person couldn't feel a sense of absolute treachery, and perhaps guilt, when they realised what they had been playing for, what it represented, and how it commented on the 'collect-'em-all' nature of gaming?"
Martin Hollis



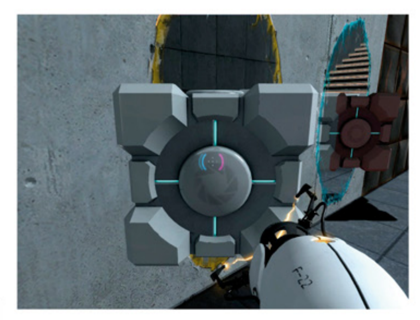
"*Metal Gear Solid 4*'s flashback to *Metal Gear Solid*. Old Snake is informed that he needs to go back to the Shadow Moses facility to encounter Liquid. He dozes off and a flashback lets us play as Snake in Metal Gear Solid's first level, which was also set in Shadow Moses, complete with dated graphics and sound. A great use of post-modernism showcasing the medium's maturity."
Kostas Karachalios

"Nintendo unveils *The Wind Waker*. The world gasped, *Zelda* was declared dead, and Nintendo merely knuckled down and produced one of the finest games of the decade. Its enduring beauty is a testament to throwing the rulebook out of the window and pushing the expectations of a fanbase to the very limit, which still remains a truly rare occurrence."
Iain Critien

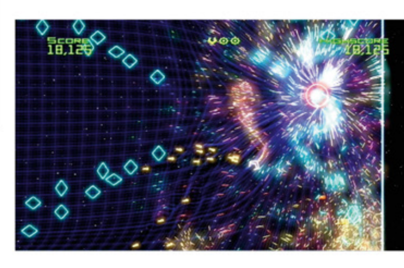


"Sega exiting hardware in 2001. A test of being a true gamer is how you felt after Sega ceased console development. With such rich history and a huge fanbase, many lamented the loss of a giant, but hope lived on in the news that software production would not cease. Console wars were never the same again."
Somsuddin Ali

"Daigo's Parry against Justin Wong. All the drama, all the tension – and even he didn't think he was going to win. Daigo's sensational parry of Justin Wong's Super combo in that YouTube video [tinyurl.com/yp7wzn] to come back from near death and win. Even with gaming opening up this decade, this very technical display should be remembered."
Martin Kent



"*Portal*. Can a moment be two and a half hours of joyous gameplay? The greatest mindfuck ever assembled."
Matt Barr



"Going HD. The first game I ever experienced in HD was *Geometry Wars*, and in that moment I was spellbound. The difference was unreal, the colours were so vivid and sharp. It's very difficult to return to SD when it's forced on me."
Alex Walker



"The best moment in gaming was my early faltering steps in *World Of WarCraft*. I had never played an MMO before, and the apprehension of joining an entire world full of real people filled me with real fear and trepidation. That Blizzard made you feel so welcome, and spread so many possibilities and adventures in front of you, meant that no other game matched that sense of wonder."
JohnC

"Logging into Xbox Live. Suddenly, gaming becomes social, and accessible to the masses. Other consoles may have got online first, and PCs may have been doing it forever, but the Xbox Live service showed them all how it should be done. A service worth paying for. I play games I would never have previously considered just for the multiplayer gaming. **Edge** forumites are suddenly real people, who speak!"
Biscuitman

An audience with...

Yoichi Wada

Sharply suited and impeccably polite, Square Enix president Yoichi Wada fits the stereotype of a Japanese businessman – but his plans for the company are anything but traditional

In many ways, Square Enix could be considered the most unashamedly 'Japanese' of Japanese game developers, with a long history of titles, created for the Japanese market first and foremost, which seem to have become internationally successful almost by surprise. Overseas releases have generally only come after months of slow localisation, with few changes to suit local tastes outside of bug and interface fixes.

But that position doesn't seem sustainable in the modern marketplace. President and CEO **Yoichi Wada** has spearheaded a big change in the company's direction, from its takeover of an unashamedly western publisher, Eidos, to planning the global release of *Final Fantasy XIII* for within three months of the Japanese launch – a record for the series. We sat down with Wada to discover the origins of this impetus for change, the future of Square Enix and Eidos, and the personal tastes in gaming of this otherwise enigmatic industry force.

How did you decide to begin working in the videogame industry?
Ever since I was a student I wanted to manage a company. In Japan what normally happens is you're recruited as a freshman into a company and you go through your career with the goal of reaching the position of president; the president, in that sense, is only a goal. I felt that setting out to be a president as my profession was possible, so I intended to become president of a company by the age of 40.

However, it's not possible to just become a president without a track record! So I thought that it would be best to go through some kind of an apprenticeship at a company and the toughest apprenticeship, or the most demanding company at that time, was a securities house. So I joined a securities house.

But ultimately I wanted to run a company with a 'theme'. The fundamental themes in the 21st century are creating life or creating society. A company that creates life is a biotechnology company, a company that creates society would be an IT company or a game company. Well, of course, I loved games and I played them a lot, so I decided to join a game company, Square. However, back then I was really an uneducated consumer – I was a big fan of *Final Fantasy* but I hadn't realised it was made by Square!

What other games were you a fan of before you joined Square Enix?
There are a lot of games that I like. And there are a lot of games that I loved. Especially when 3D games started to become popular. One that's really stuck with me is Kenji Eno's *D*. I also really liked the *Myst*, *Resident Evil* and *Metal Gear* titles from that period.

> "Final Fantasy XIII is going be something special, but whether we continue to internally create this type of game remains to be seen"

That period really set in stone a certain style of Japanese development, which some might say has reached its culmination with *Final Fantasy XIII*. How do you think these kinds of big-budget, long-in-development Japanese games stand up in the current climate?
I believe *Final Fantasy XIII* is going be something special, and that it's going to be well received by the audience. But whether we are going to continue to internally create this type of game remains to be seen, because I actually feel that the team that was involved with *Final Fantasy XIII* should next move on to create and generate some 'next generation' forms of play. Internally and externally I feel there's an expectation of Square Enix to offer something new, and I really think that the *Final Fantasy* team could create something completely different, but at the moment they're strictly catering to the particular audience they have now.

Are you interested in catering more and more to the global market? It's particularly notable that the localisation and overseas release of *Final Fantasy XIII* is being handled a lot more rapidly than has been the case with previous titles.
From the early stage of the development, our target was to be able to have the release gap as little as three months between the Japanese release and the United States release. So the team has been able to make that happen, although it was a very challenging feat.

The work itself it is an accumulation of small tasks. For example, if we look at the text localisation, even before the game is completely done they are simultaneously translating. One major difference now is that in the past there were many different TV formats – NTSC and PAL, and so on – and that at least meant we'd have to add another month's delay for the



European release, but now most TVs are digital, and it's far easier for us to work with that.

Square Enix is often perceived globally as 'the *Final Fantasy* company' – since you've purchased Eidos, are you looking to alter that perception?
We don't want to be seen as the company that only has *Final Fantasy*, or *Dragon Quest*, it's true, but we would like to maintain the prospective of the audience thinking when they hear the words Square Enix that they would only think of high-quality games. So the only image that we aspire to have is of high-quality, and there is no conflict with that with Eidos in the group. Actually, the people in the Eidos studios have been more worried about the *Final Fantasy* connection – at their end they're saying: "Well, actually, our game has a lot of blood in it…" [Laughs] But that's not a problem to us – it makes their game more faithful to their vision!

But have there been any changes in the corporate and creative culture in Square Enix since you've joined the company?
We have planned on changes and it is starting to transform, but Square Enix is not in its final state yet. The part of that which is challenging is that people need to be willing to accept change. It's fine that there is such a particular love of the titles we create, but there's a resistance to accepting something different.

You're finding it hard to get your Japanese developers to face up to new realities?
There is a bad habit of sticking too much to long-established customs. For example, let's say there is someone who is very good artistically when drawing using a pen, and there's another individual who can do exactly the same quality using a pencil – but the custom so far has been







Three games under one big Square Enix umbrella: *Dragon Quest XI, Tomb Raider Underworld* and *Batman: Arkham Asylum*

to use a pen. The problem is that the people who are used to using the pen refuse to even believe the pencil exists!

I'm not saying I'm trying to force these developers to use pencils when all they know is pens. What I am trying to do is to make it clear to them that good work is being created using pencils, and with that acknowledgement in mind do an even better job with the pen. That's what the substance of accepting difference is – not to force someone to use a different format but to understand that there is a different way, and perhaps a place for different techniques.

Capcom's Keiji Inafune created something of a stir when he said during the recent Tokyo Game Show that "Japan is over" in terms of its videogame industry. What was your response to that?
To say something so extreme is surprising. I'm surprised Capcom allowed Inafune to say that at TGS. My message by proxy for the Japanese developers who would have heard such a discouraging message is that if they are willing today, then they definitely have the capability to change and face tomorrow.

Is there any level on which you'd agree with what Infune was claiming?
I'll say that it's a challenge. But it's very strange to have such an extremely pessimistic view.

With major Japanese-owned intellectual properties such as *Silent Hill* and *Dead Rising* now being produced by developers outside of Japan, could you imagine using non-Japanese developers for Square Enix franchises?
That is one of the possible paths, but it's not something that we would shift completely over to. But there are many combinations of ways to handle an IP. We're not considering it at the moment, but there is always the possibility that in the future a *Final Fantasy* could be produced with the input of our western developers, overseen by our Japanese developers.

Are you currently handling Square Enix's European and North American developers differently from your Japanese staff?
Our studios, until the very end, are independent. So, for example, Eidos Montreal is continuing the way it has been. But our business backend is being centralised. We want to make the best of the local talent without interfering on that level, but to manage our revenue to the best of its potential by controlling our business decisions and seeing the big picture. Eidos, for example, has some very good IP, and they have diversified into different areas in the way that we merchandise our IP at Square Enix, but they haven't been as successful at monetising it. I think there's a better way to generate revenue from those IPs. And, indeed, the majority of success we've had in merchandising our IP with Square Enix has been within Japan, but in future expect to see us to expand this globally in a more aggressive manner.

Speaking from the perspective of the head of Japan's Computer Entertainment Supplier's Association, what challenges have you faced with piracy within Japan?
Piracy does a lot of damage, but within the Asian region the majority of damage comes from outside of Japan – not including the Nintendo DS. The R4 continues to inflict tremendous damage to our business. So in tandem with Nintendo, we have brought the issue to court. And we have been able to reach a certain degree of success from the court rulings.

> "For Keiji Inafune to say that 'Japan is over' is surprising. I'm surprised Capcom allowed him to say that at the Tokyo Game Show"

During your talk at the Montreal International Game Summit you seemed to imply that creating a 'connection' with the content – such as pride over finding maps in *Dragon Quest IX* – would be a way of making consumers feel that games aren't as 'disposable' as they do right now.
That is one of the solutions, I think. But no matter what happens, what can be copied will be copied. So we need to base our business on something that cannot be copied; that, as I mentioned, might be the personalised save data, for example. Or it might be the worth of the human relationships in the communities that build around the games. As a result, those are the areas that need to become the source of the revenue. That's how the business model needs to change accordingly.

Do you see online distribution as a possible solution?
That's an open-ended question, but it does offer a valid solution, at least partially.

Obviously you must have your hands full, but do you still find time to play games?
[Laughs] Yes, I still do. I just finished *Uncharted 2*, and when I get back home from this business trip I'm looking forward to playing *Modern Warfare 2*.

Those games are very cinematic, but in quite a different way from the games Square Enix is known for. Are they the types of things you would like Japanese studios to take a look at in order to explore different viewpoints?
Absolutely. I proactively try to play as many western games as possible and I also provide comments about these overseas games to our creators as much as possible. And, with Eidos, we are the publisher of many of these western games, so I hope that we will be able to get our Japanese staff to become interested in overseas games.

Western consumers are very interested in Japanese games, but rarely vice versa. Do you see yourself pushing, for example, Eidos-developed titles harder in Japan to make the consumer more interested?
Well, actually, I've found the person that is prejudiced is actually the retailer and not the actual players. The retailers have a prejudice against overseas titles, and they won't procure them. But something like *Batman: Arkham Asylum*, for example, is something that is very like the Japanese taste in games, in fact it caters to very much the Japanese taste. *Arkham Asylum* is like the best aspects of *Metal Gear Solid*, but evolved.

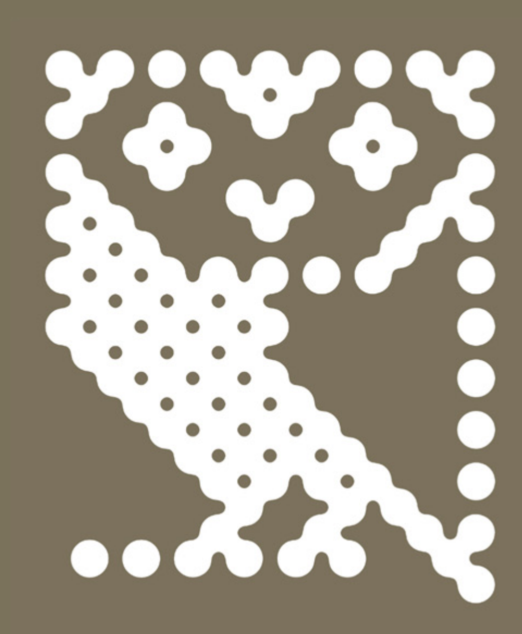


Final Fantasy XIII launched in Japan on December 17, and will be released in the west on March 9

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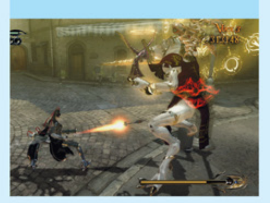
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Review

New games assessed in words and numbers

Edge's most played

Bayonetta



We braved Infinite Climax (it's a difficulty level, not a lifestyle choice) and without Witch Time the sheer beauty of dodge-cancelling at any time almost made us blub.
360, PS3, PLATINUM GAMES

Assassin's Creed II



Ezio's such a charmer, and we are such obsessive box-tickers. The treasure maps make it so leisurely, even if we are still getting chased: we just can't stop pickpocketing.
360, PC, UBISOFT

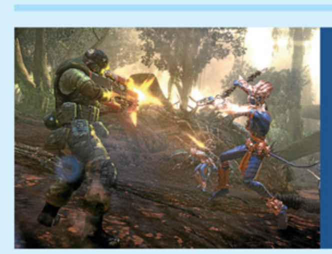
Art Style: Intersect



A refit of GBA game *Digidrive*, *Intersect*'s another delight from Q-Games – clean visuals and simple audio layering over a pressured puzzle concept of near genius.
DSI, Q GAMES

Close encounters of the 3D kind

The big-budget three-dimensional game has arrived



Avatar's 3D can be supremely effective, but the experience suffers from being aimed right at the centre of the gaming market, which means that it's not the sort of production to take big risks

Is 3D the new 3D? Is the potential to create games that utilise the same kind of depth-perception tricks that are currently attracting crowds to cinemas about to cause an explosion of design creativity last seen when developers embraced the polygon and everyone from Mario to Pac-Man peeled themselves away from a scrolling backdrop to explore a new kind of playground that stretched back into the distance?

If 3D games – like this month's *Avatar* – really are the future, then the future involves fiddling with in-game menus on which, among other things, you have to enter the exact model of your television. The future involves paying for that television as well, perhaps not that long after you made the expensive leap to HD. And before all that, the future involves reading up on the 3D marketplace, and deciding which of a variety of competing technologies is likely to become the new standard. That's a lot of work to get out of the way before settling down for an evening battling the Na'vi.

Film companies are quick to embrace 3D technology because it's one of the best options they have left: a powerful brand of spectacle that draws punters towards cinemas rather than torrents. But while audiences around the world can enjoy Avatar in all its dimensions in most local screens, movie studios are hoping that the videogame industry will be the driver for 3D technology in the home: a means of tempting influential early adopters into absorbing the often ludicrous costs of the current hardware.

All of which brings us back to the games themselves, and that may be the biggest hurdle of all. *Avatar*, while competent, is a fairly standard thirdperson action title that struggles to add much to a template that's already been embellished more entertainingly for humble 2D screens. Meanwhile, it's hard to imagine too many developers taking on the kind of risks involved in building a game's mechanics around three-dimensional displays until there's a big enough installed base to provide a reasonable audience for them.

So perhaps the problem with 3D isn't the hardware as much as the software: why should we believe in the future, when the people making the games don't?









Edge's scoring system explained:
1 = one, 2 = two, 3 = three,
4 = four, 5 = five, 6 = six, 7 = seven,
8 = eight, 9 = nine, 10 = ten



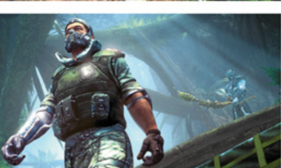
JAMES CAMERON'S AVATAR: THE GAME

FORMAT: 360 (VERSION TESTED), PS3, PC, WII, DS, PSP
RELEASE: OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** UBISOFT
DEVELOPER: UBISOFT MONTREAL **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E204









The blue Na'vi's height difference (they average ten feet tall, apparently) gives you a better reach, but doesn't change the way the game plays very much. As an alien species, they're distinctly vanilla

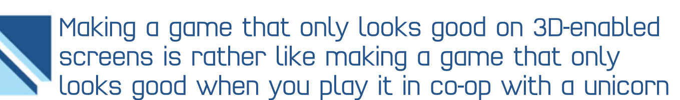
Fittingly, given the movie's land-grabbing themes, *Avatar: The Game* is largely about money. Based on a cinematic marvel whose visionary demands are so intense (or, if you'd prefer, whose premise is so uninspiring) that James Cameron was forced to raise funds for it by himself, if you sit down to play *Avatar* the way it's intended to be played, it will cost you hundreds of pounds in television upgrades.

Setting aside the argument that spending millions of dollars making a game that only really looks good on 3D-enabled screens is rather like spending millions of dollars on a game that only looks good when you play it in co-op with a unicorn, at least you can rest assured that Ubisoft Montreal has held up this part of the bargain. *Avatar*'s 3D is a quiet revelation: textures shimmer, the lowish thirdperson camera puts plenty of bobbing foliage in your face, and various animal attacks and flying sequences deliver on the spectacle. Far from gratuitous, the developer is actually laudably subtle in its approach, and the technology gives the game a sense of place it's notably lacking when running on normal Earth televisions.

And yet, the flight into three dimensions can't save the game from a rather uninspired structure. *Avatar* isn't a bad game by any means, but is rather workmanlike when it comes to missions and narrative. The first half hour, in particular, sends you out into the swamps of an alien world to prosecute such exciting agendas as securing perimeters and checking that various bits of field equipment are working. Steady on: minutes later you're being asked to pick some flowers for the science guys.

All of this is simply the quiet build-up, however, the introduction to the workaday life of a human RDA squaddie, toiling to ensure Earth's wholesale pillaging of an extra-terrestrial paradise goes smoothly. About 45 minutes into the story, having met the elegant blue indigenous Na'vi, you're offered a meaty, game-defining choice: stick with the military industrial complex, or go rogue, living the simple life of a ten-foot-tall alien with a tail.

It's telling that the game's most potentially interesting moment, when you choose your allegiance in the heat of a sweaty standoff, is also one of the most artificial. Although it keeps the action in-game, Ubisoft squanders the chance for a little fleet-footed naturalism by freezing two rather unappealing representatives of the opposing factions into rigid statues with glowing identification markers over their heads, and asking which one you want to blast the most, turning a crucial piece of interactive storytelling into a menu operated by bullets.



Making a game that only looks good on 3D-enabled screens is rather like making a game that only looks good when you play it in co-op with a unicorn

It doesn't help that the factions themselves are both fairly uninspiring. Just



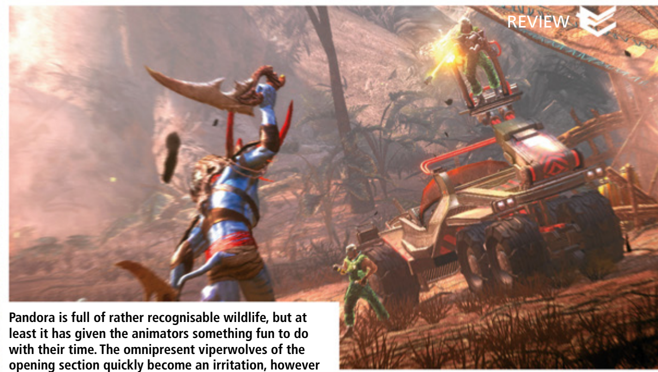


Both factions get aerial options, and the RDA's armoured helicopters are by far the more fun of the two. One of the more effective 3D elements of the game, flying sections still include enough explosions and falling rocks to entertain the 2D-panel crowd









Pandora is full of rather recognisable wildlife, but at least it has given the animators something fun to do with their time. The omnipresent viperwolves of the opening section quickly become an irritation, however



Far Cry 2's engine looks more comfortable here than in, well, *Far Cry 2*, Pandora's colourful world giving the shrubbery a chance to stand out against something, while the African adventure's draw-distance trouble has largely been resolved

as *Avatar*'s plot can never quite decide whether this is all about Iraq, or Vietnam, Nestlé or the fate of the Native Americans, it patronises its audience with a choice between militaristic hardnuts and tedious models of ancient virtue. At least in mechanical terms there's a nice delineation between the two, with the RDA offering an explosive shooter while the Na'vi will give you a more intimate, tactical melee-heavy experience. Humans get to ride in choppers and jeeps, aliens swan about the sky on lithe Banshees or nip between the trees on silvery horses, and both get different campaigns and their own weapons, power-ups, and fast-travel systems.

But they both also get a shapeless tangle of environments and limited objectives. While *Avatar* quickly gets a lot more enjoyable once you're freed from your role of deep-space handyman, Ubisoft still finds it difficult to translate its epic struggle into really exciting missions, even when you take to the air. Ultimately, the moral powder keg that should blast the game into life – rape the planet or protect it – is a dud, and while it leads to two noticeably different adventures, they merely ensure that a game that's only barely worth playing through once turns out to be barely worth playing through twice.

Never fear, however, because there are some decent RPG elements on hand to work their calculated magic: everything you do in *Avatar* provides you with experience points that unlock items, while a frustrated *Diablo* developer has even put question marks over the heads of the NPCs parroting your mission objectives. There's quite a bit of fun to be had in choosing your various loadouts, but this system alone can't make the wider texture of the game more engaging.

A paucity of imagination is ultimately *Avatar*'s real problem, and it's hard to know whether to pin that one on Ubisoft or Cameron. There's a choice of factions for you: Ubisoft has sent you on so many quotidian missions, but Cameron dreamt the whole place up, creating an alien world that looks, aside from the odd floating rock, like Centre Parcs.

Quietly competent to the very end, *Avatar*'s certainly not the disaster you may have feared, but it can feel patronising, pompous and a little unnecessary. In many ways, perhaps, it might be the most fitting accompaniment to Cameron's movie that Ubisoft could have delivered. **[5]**



Melee combat is the Na'vi's biggest differentiator. Combos are simple but effective, and there's a fine sense of squishy impact. Probably not a good idea against that mech, however

Full circle



***Avatar*'s alien wildlife might be peculiarly bland – Cameron's expensive bestiary either resembles discount Pokémon or rhinos covered in tinfoil – but the RDA's vehicles tend to be quietly appealing. And quietly familiar, actually, from the metallic sheen of the Warthog-alike to the punchy chopper that looks like a Pelican mated with an air conditioning unit. What's happened could perhaps best be described as a form of street justice, however, as Bungie, after years of quietly pulling inspiration from Cameron's Aliens, is pickpocketed in turn by the great man himself.**

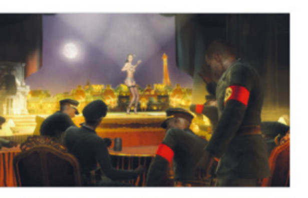


THE SABOTEUR

FORMAT: EA RELEASE: PANDEMIC
PUBLISHER: 360, PC, PS3 (VERSION TESTED)
DEVELOPER: OUT NOW PREVIOUSLY IN: E205



Coaxing pretty explosions out of Nazi watchtowers and equipment is as simple as pressing a couple of buttons, and an excuse to enjoy the game's expansive rooftop views before the daylight comes and spoils them all





There's a Trophy for scaling the Eiffel Tower and enjoying the view, but the most you actually climb is the odd flight of stairs before taking the elevator

Nazi-occupied France, the 1940s. Irishman Sean Devlin, who looks like Harrison Ford and sounds like the whole of Europe, brushes shoulders with a mysterious ally. "Psst!" says the man. "A message for you." And then he's gone. The note reads: 'Duty calls once again, Irishman, and men of conscience must answer. Meet me at the slaughterhouse. Luc.' That's strange: Devlin's already in the slaughterhouse, having been led there by a giant 'Lu' symbol on the map. But whatever – thanks for the advice.

Deeper inside the Resistance safehouse, the next to cross his path is a man hunched over a workbench. "I've seen you before, haven't I?" says Devlin. "The night we broke those legionnaires out of the German lockup." The man nods – yes, he remembers it well. It was five minutes ago, in fact. Devlin has just driven *from* the lockup, and is now wondering how he's having this conversation at all. Is it a twin? A prank? The French, Devlin's been advised, "are supposed to be rude", but surely they're not masters of time and space, too.

After almost 20 hours with *The Saboteur*, we've got reams of stuff that's capable of raising an eyebrow or two. It seems a shame to waste it. Devlin, to a voluptuous English spy: "Come on, I'll sneak yer in the back door." Spy: "I wouldn't have it any other way." Devlin, while exiting a Nazi checkpoint: "Top o' the mornin', shithead!" A priest, handing out a mission: "In the name of all that is holy, blow his fucking head off." Devlin, nine minutes into a gunfight: "Shoite! Gonfire!" An NPC, arriving late to a mission by running there backwards: "I stood up when I should have ducked."

Made by the people who almost finished *Mercenaries 2*, *The Saboteur* is an awesome display of clichés, stereotypes, shortcuts and failures in logic. The Nazis of occupied France, it suggests, had no memory whatsoever for faces, crimes, car number plates or what their own accents were supposed to sound like from one word to the next. De Oirish, apparently, like nothing more than drinking, shagging and planting a few bombs in public places, even when they're supposed to be channelling William Grover-Williams, an apparently erudite real-life spy. Every car in wartime Paris, furthermore, came equipped with a stereo.

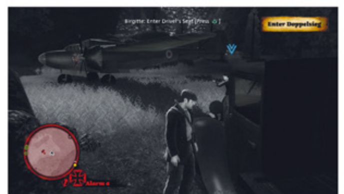
In short, it assumes that *GTAIV* is a genre rather than a game; that a story of love, tragedy, intrigue and defiance in this, the most morally conflicted of all WWII arenas, can be told while smearing pedestrians across a bumper. The result is like a monster made out of Heat, 'Allo 'Allo! and the Pink Panther movies. It spends half its duration failing to understand why it exists or what it should say, then gives up altogether and actually has some fun.

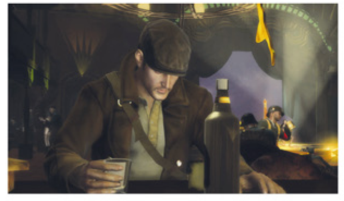
Devlin's missions, a curious mix of *GTA* and *Assassin's Creed*, struggle to pull it off. An adequate climbing system lets you scale



Black-market garages will store vehicles and even deliver getaway cars to scenes of utter chaos, not that the driver seems to care. The Aurora is one of the niftier rides, almost enjoyable enough to justify the hours of driving







buildings which, to their credit, never look like climbing frames. An inadequate stealth system then makes it hard to take advantage, most missions ending with a chaotic shootout. Rather than the enemy vision cones of a *Metal Gear*, *The Saboteur* chooses the quick-and-dirty *Velvet Assassin* option, drawing circles around everyone and filling a suspicion gauge if you get too close. The circles grow and shrink depending on what you're doing, so running or aiming a gun can make your disguises useless. Then the alarms go off and it all turns into *Mercenaries*.

Completing missions, the better of which include a castle and Zeppelin approach, an Indy-style train heist and an attack on a rooftop siege cannon, literally brings the colour back to the streets. It's another misconception: that a stark, evocative black-and-white version of Paris, clearly inspired by Schindler's List, is somehow undesirable. As the game goes on, this one triumph of *The Saboteur* is eradicated, replaced by an outtake from *Metropolis Street Racer*. Worse, the game renders the two things side by side, one district cloaked in night while the next is bathed in sunshine, reduced to porridge by the game's LOD scaling. The price of freedom, it appears, is beauty.

Padding out the three acts are a handful of minigames and races – Devlin, like Grover-Williams, is an accomplished race-car driver, though the driving itself leaves a lot to be desired. Such is the grip of fear that neither Nazis nor Parisians can hold a straight line, let alone keep pace with a human being. Like most *GTA* clones, the game strategically spawns cars to keep up the illusion of pursuit, but with AI this bad, escape is as simple as keeping to the road. Some organised races are a disaster, cars spawning in staggered groups – sometimes in plain sight – to stop you taking the lead in a matter of seconds.

But, yes, there is fun to be had in *The Saboteur*, scattered between the giant stretches of needless driving. There's enough of that old *Mercenaries* gusto, more than a dash of accidental comedy, and plenty of supergun-wielding stormtroopers, with their masks and robot voiceboxes, to shoot. But that's just it: what are the Helghast even doing here?

The occupation of Paris is one of the more troubling, challenging episodes in WWII. When the Nazis came, its artists and writers fled, leaving the cultural capital of Europe to whore itself to the enemy. The city was ostensibly unchanged, yet behind the cabaret clubs the Final Solution continued apace, with a vigour comparable to that of Germany itself. Somewhere in *The Saboteur* is a nod to this, buried beneath all the rushed code, incongruous ideas and atrocious dialogue. Pandemic, adieu. **[5]**

> A priest, handing out a mission: "In the name of all that is holy, blow his fucking head off." Devlin, nine minutes into a gunfight: "Shoite! Gonfire!"



One of the stealthier attacks involves clouting a Nazi so hard that his helmet flies off. Chopping down pedestrians while crashing your car into a wall is usually ignored by nearby patrols


Resembling a rather hurried use of the Photoshop smudge tool, the onscreen battle between good and evil wreaks havoc with the sky

Café chaud



***The Saboteur* must be one of the only games in which the opening slides, usually the preserve of company logos and text that no one reads, are gatecrashed by a some perky buns bigger than the Eiffel Tower. Then it's on to the title screen, or what little is visible under a giant advert for The Midnight Show, a porno patch that turns the game's Belle de Nuit cabaret club into something a bit risqué. A crafty way, in other words, of bumping up the game's certificate without endangering it on the high street. It's Fiesta-grade hot coffee, made without irony but at least with the sense to leave the content on a server and not on the disc.**



TONY HAWK: RIDE

FORMAT: 360, PS3 (VERSION TESTED), WII RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: ACTIVISION DEVELOPER: ROBOMODO (PS3, 360), BUZZ MONKEY (WII) PREVIOUSLY IN: E203





There are some fairly basic customisation options for your skater in the game's Road Trip career mode, and an expansive wardrobe of licensed clothing is available

Graffiti artists, spelunkers and street lugists beware – it seems that Activision is in the process of systematically repackaging every major American counter-cultural movement of the last 30 years as premium-priced videogames with big, bespoke peripherals, and you could well be next. Having tackled rock'n'roll with *Guitar Hero* and dance music with *DJ Hero*, it's now skateboarding's turn to be simplified and plasticised with *Tony Hawk: Ride*, a radical retooling of the publisher's longstanding alternative sports series featuring a board-shaped controller.

It's difficult to determine which of the two – skateboarding or the *Tony Hawk* series – is done the biggest disservice by the game. Skateboarding has a strong case – although the increasingly commercialised sport has travelled a long way since the drought-dried Californian swimming pools of 1976, the reduction of its style, technique and adventure into a wheel-less indoor mimic seems a particularly sharp humiliation. As for the *Hawk* series, it's bewildering that a game so successful and established should react to the emergence of its first serious rival (EA's accomplished *Skate*) by abandoning its foundations entirely.



Triggering the board's motion sensors will make the in-game skater grab the board during tricks. Notionally this is done with the hand, but the controller seems to have no way of knowing whether you're cheating

Because that's precisely what *Ride* does. Aside from the presence of its titular endorser, it has as much in common with its immediate predecessors as it does with its EA-published competitor – very little. It's been redesigned entirely to accommodate the board controller, a dense plastic reproduction of a skateboard which houses four motion sensors for registering hand grabs and foot movement, and several accelerometers for orientation in three-dimensional space. It has pronounced curves at the front and back ends, and a rounded underside like a shallow boat's hull for tilting.



It's bewildering that a game so successful and established should react to its first serious rival by abandoning its foundations entirely



The menus struggle to present your options with any clarity. During the Road Trip career mode, the event completion screen offers options to 'play again' or 'quit' rather than any kind of progression. It's poorly implemented

The game has been completely remodelled to suit the new controller, on the understanding that by standing on the board and mimicking the movements of a skater – shifting body weight, leaning from side to side, raising the front or back – the player will be able to accurately control the actions of their in-game character.

And on a very basic level this is indeed how the game works. Specifically, this is how the game works on the beginner setting (which handles steering automatically) and before you're asked to do any tricks. Pulled on rails through the short runs and obstacle courses which now form the entirety of the game's locations, all the player must do is tilt the board nose-up to perform an ollie, or tail-up for a nollie. Balancing in between gives you a two-wheeled manual, and grinds on walls and rails are both automatic and easy to trigger once in the air thanks to generous collision detection.

Under these limited terms, *Ride* is operational. Fun, even. The new events last no longer than two or three minutes – often as little as a few seconds – and without the additional concern of leaning left or right to





Several pro skaters appear in the tutorials and between levels. They're presented through heavily filtered video, making for stiff performances





Sometimes, when trying to beat specific objectives and challenges, it's easier to manipulate the board in ways other than those prescribed by the game. It's possible to earn the Trophy for a 400ft manual by resting the board on a table and holding the tail down with your hand. Some may consider this cheating

guide yourself through the levels the physical novelty of directing onscreen movement approaches the action-matching satisfaction of *Guitar Hero*'s fret mastery. There are odd inconsistencies, like the fact that swiping your foot by the side sensor to trigger a speed-boosting floor push only activates the onscreen motion as you break the sensor's field of vision at the end of your own, creating a half-second delay. But it works.

And then *Ride* spoils things by asking you to perform tricks more complicated than jumping up and down. Following an ollie, flip tricks are activated by tilting the board, and flick flip tricks by rotating it. These are fairly arbitrary control choices anyway (the game moves further away from real-world actions as tricks become more complex) and, more damagingly, the peripheral's shape makes distinguishing between tilting and rotating as you're leaning on the back curve of the board extraordinarily difficult. It simply isn't the right shape to make deliberate selection of one or the other consistently possible.

Seemingly aware of its own lack of articulation, *Ride* avoids asking you to perform specific tricks, just specific *types* of trick (so flips instead of flick flips, as opposed to a heel flip over a finger flip). A good thing, since what seem to be identical actions performed on the board very often result in different and totally unpredictable onscreen actions. Keeping things basic, the game limits itself to three simple events: Speed, in which the player skates downhill as fast as possible, picking up time-reducing bonus icons by performing ollies and grinds; Trick, in which any and all moves count towards a score tally; and Challenge, which sees the player asked to perform either tilt or rotation-activated tricks (even this small differentiation makes it the game's hardest mode by a stretch, the board's clumsiness resulting in enforced repetition of certain sections until the haphazard accelerometer gods smile on you).

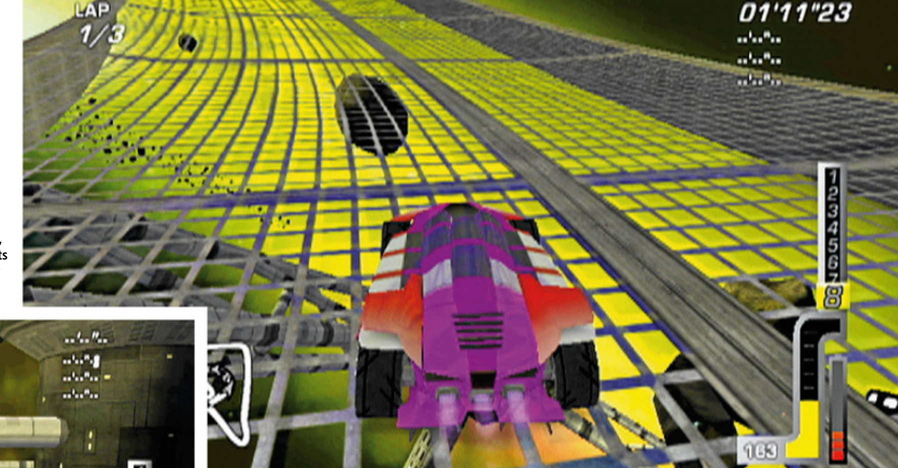
And these problems are all with the game still set on the hand-holding beginner difficulty. Take off the stabilisers and you'll also be responsible for steering yourself through the game's courses and street runs by tilting the board in your chosen direction. Added to the existing clumsiness, this verges on unplayable – even those gifted with excellent balance will struggle to master the controls, which are unresponsive to a light touch and disastrously over-sensitive to a heavier one, leading to clumsy, swinging changes of direction.

The root problem is that the board controller itself is poorly conceived. The notion of mimicking while stationary an activity entirely reliant on motion is deeply flawed. Balancing while standing still is unrelated to actual skating and, crucially, unenjoyable in the same as playing a BMX game by balancing a stationary bicycle would be. There's no feedback or context, and using the peripheral, and indeed playing the game at all, has the same stunted lack of purpose as standing in a dark room and jogging on the spot. **[3]**

Board: stupid



The clumsiness of the board peripheral is most evident after flick flip tricks. After rotating the board to activate the trick, players must manually return it to the forward-facing position fixed during the game's initial calibration, or the board's orientation will be affected. It's unintuitive and clunky – real skateboards, or course, would complete the flip and return to a start position. Or not, and cause a painful bail-out. On reflection. either one would be more fun than sliding a strip of plastic around in circles on a carpet.



Each mode – Solo, Race, Battle – holds ten events which are progressively unlocked as you meet the requirements set





Even before upgrading, the cars are all stupidly fast, but things really take off once you begin chaining the floor-mounted speed boosts together



WHEELSPIN

FORMAT: **WII** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **BETHESDA** DEVELOPER: **AWESOME PLAY**

If there's one criticism levelled at Nintendo's Wii that is hard to counter it's the fact that, as is so often the case with the company's consoles, it doesn't play host to a satisfyingly broad range of racing titles able to match the genre-leading examples seen on other hardware. Occasionally an exception powers out of this feeble garage of mediocrity, such as the very likeable *F1 2009*, but any inroads Codemasters may have made are carved up by games like *Wheelspin*.

A futuristic racer with echoes of *Rollcage* and *F-Zero* in which cars capable of absurd speeds negotiate treacherous gravity-defying tracks, Awesome Play's effort makes clear its target audience. Get past the lifeless presentation and unintuitive car selection menu and the loading screen displays controls which see acceleration and braking referred to as 'Faster' and 'Slower'. But anyone expecting a kid-friendly ride is in for a shock – *Wheelspin* is arguably the most infuriating racing game of this generation.

The principal culprit is the control system. At a time when the aforementioned *F1 2009* has shown that refined Wii Remote steering is possible, *Wheelspin*'s equivalent is insufficiently responsive. Combined with a handling model that seems intent on breaking your spirit the moment you get into your stride, it's a recipe for disaster. How much disaster? Well, in just the first three hours of play we clocked up 298 respawns from either crashes or veering off the track. Hardly what you'd consider a joyous balance between play and punishment.

Most of that pain was suffered in Solo, a time-trial-styled mode in which the object is to clear tracks by achieving a set cumulative time spent in the 'zone' – activated whenever your pace clears a target speed – in the given number of laps. A Battle option throws weapons into the mix but proves inconsequential the moment you realise that hitting opponents with anything that isn't auto-targeting is down to luck, not skill.

Finally, there's Race, a mode that's presumably been included for those who didn't find Solo sufficiently irritating. Imagine engaging all of your hand-eye dexterity to keep a speeding car on a deviously designed track and then having to contend with AI competitors that block your path at best and launch you off the circuit at worst.

Yet the most frustration in *Wheelspin* comes not from the jarring experience the game delivers but the potential clearly evident at its core. It may effectively be an old game concept in new clothes but in those rare moments when everything functions as it should few would successfully argue the ride isn't thrilling. The sense of speed is remarkable and managing a trouble-free lap is hugely rewarding. But even when you disregard the charmless character, ignore the relentless music and eventually manage to tame the handling, something comes along to spoil the party – an odiously placed bump on the road that causes an unnecessary spin, the sudden inability to respawn even when already off the track, resulting in a lost race… the list goes on. Nintendo's console may well need racing games, but not this desperately. **[3]**





What *Wheelspin* lacks in the graphics department – and it lacks plenty, even by Wii standards – is made up for by its excellent sense of speed as you rattle along the track

Rollcage, anyone?



Money you earn from accomplishing targets, race positions and beating times can be spent on other cars. Alternatively, you can concentrate on tuning up your existing ride. Aside from new skins (which will set you back a disproportionate amount of cash), you get three levels of grip, acceleration and speed to play with. The improvement is noticeable and can mean the difference between meeting a level's target and having to hit the 'restart' option an unhealthy number of times. But it still doesn't make the game considerably more enjoyable.



Barring mid-season driver changes, *F1 2009* includes an accurate representation of the year's championship including, for the first time in an F1 game, the Valencia, Abu Dhabi and Singapore grands prix



F1 2009

FORMAT: **WII (VERSION TESTED), PSP** RELEASE: **OUT NOW**
PUBLISHER: **CODEMASTERS** DEVELOPER: **SUMO DIGITAL** PREVIOUSLY IN: **E205**

It's immediately obvious that *F1 2009* in no way represents the apogee of Codemasters' ambition as far as its relatively newly acquired licence is concerned. Ostensibly, this opening season is a licensor-satisfying stopgap while the foundations are laid for a multi-year assault on higher-spec hardware. In spite of this, the game's reverence towards the sport is never in question, and it's a better rendition of motor racing than you might expect from a short-gestation Wii title.

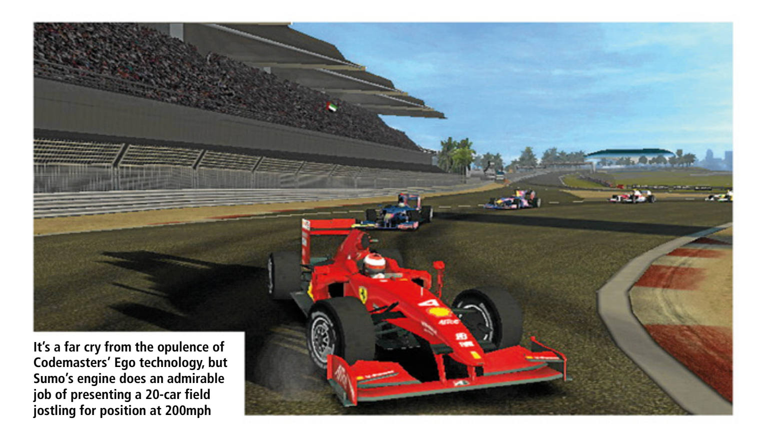
Sumo has taken a design approach that prioritises the important aspects of a sub-genre under-represented on Wii, elevating *F1 2009* beyond dismissal as a mere generational segue. Sacrifices in visual fidelity have clearly been made in favour of securing the framerate and ensuring an authentically intoxicating sensation of speed. Sumo has also managed to coax remarkable performance from the untethered Wii wheel as a control method (which wholly validates the decision to include a bespoke, F1-flavoured version in the box). *F1 2009*'s precise handling inspires confidence that your hyper-engineered racing car can be placed anywhere on these broad ribbons of asphalt, should you so wish, and that confidence allows you to push the limits of your driving talent rather than the limitations of the software. Simply driving a lap at speed can be rewarding in and of itself.

Sadly, in the paddock it's a different story, and the developer appears to have taken its cues from Sony's frustrated latter-day efforts when it comes to the career mode. The anodyne system of staring at an email inbox before and after every event is lifted directly from Studio Liverpool's structure, and feels like as identically dispassionate an approach to what is, for many, an enormously emotive sport. This shortcoming is brought into even sharper relief by Codemasters' own strides toward genuine off-track involvement in *Dirt 2* – there's no question that when *F1* returns on more capable technology, the periphery should be far more fulfilling.

Sumo has produced a typically assured on-track experience in a short amount of time for Codemasters, but in being forced to turn around this commission at speed the developer has also highlighted the inherent challenge that tackling the F1 licence presents. The sport's on-track jousting is potentially some of the fastest and most exhilarating source material around, but by default developers appear to struggle to present it in anything other than a dry and overly technical fashion. If Codemasters can't find an entirely fresh way to bookend the grands prix – one that evokes the thrill and glamour of the sport – it's going to have squandered the resurgence of interest in Formula One and that presumably sizeable investment as well. **[7]**



In splitscreen mode the sensation of speed is retained at the cost of even more polygons. The option to play an entire season co-operatively absolutely validates its inclusion



It's a far cry from the opulence of Codemasters' Ego technology, but Sumo's engine does an admirable job of presenting a 20-car field jostling for position at 200mph

Micro machines

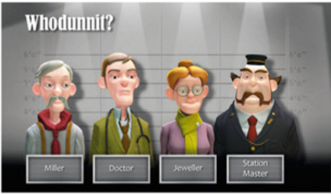




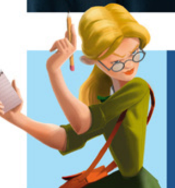
The alternative to the Wii edition is the miniaturised PSP version, which shares identical structure to its housebound fraternal twin, although splitscreen is replaced by fourplayer wireless multiplayer. Interestingly, both platforms have been criticised for questionable accuracy of control in the past, but it's the more traditional PSP layout that hinders the most when travelling at 200mph. Stripped of the Wii version's accuracy and finesse, *F1 2009* also sheds much of its charm. We imagine equipping a real F1 driver with boxing gloves and diving boots would be representative of the challenge facing those committed to tackling grands prix on the move.







The unmasking of the murderer would serve as a suitable finale for fourplayer play if only the solutions weren't so blatantly signposted throughout the episodes. Even Inspector Clouseau could bring these jokers to rights



BLUE TOAD MURDER FILES: THE MYSTERIES OF LITTLE RIDDLE

FORMAT: PS3 **RELEASE:** OUT NOW **PUBLISHER:** RELENTLESS **DEVELOPER:** IN-HOUSE **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E206



Individual mysteries may not tax the brain, but Relentless does well at weaving them into a grander story. Two episodes in, we're two villagers down and reasonably intrigued to know why, and what will happen when the village is emptied

Relentless swaps *Buzz!* for a bang as a murder kicks off an episodic foray into Professor Layton territory. The quaint backwater of Little Riddle may be more Midsomer Murders than Layton's Holmesian London, but a quick squirt of luminol reveals plenty of shared DNA. The mayor is dead and only anagrams, sums and observational puzzles stand in the way of his killer. Progress is linear even by Layton's standards, the action skipping near-automatically from puzzle to puzzle, with exposition turning 12 conundrums into a 90-minute whodunnit. It's Sunday afternoon filler of the Morse, Quincy and Columbo variety, but for one key ingredient: a Morse, Quincy or Columbo. Any butler can 'do' 'it' – the fun's in a charismatic finger-pointer.

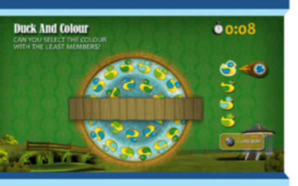
Despite offering a line-up of literary lookalike avatars – Marple, Poirot, Nancy Drew or generic Enid Blyton male – *Blue Toad Murder Files* is hijacked and spoiled by the loquacious narrator. He's a showy pest, padding 60 minutes of mystery with overcooked verbosity and a pace-halting line in exposition (his rolling Rs artificially inflate the runtime, too). Like Stephen Fry dominating a panel of better comedians in QI, the narrator is relentless, starving a charismatic cast of local oddballs of screen time. Considering purchases of further episodes hinge on the appeal of the world and characters, it might be wise to give them more breathing space. Only a Basil Fawlty hotelier and batty old coot (complete with naff collectible ceramics) have enough presence to stick in the mind.

Perhaps Relentless should have interrupted the garrulous gabbler with more puzzle beats, or at least tougher ones. Although as pleasantly presented as Layton's conundrums, they are designed with time limits in mind rather than any satisfying mental gymnastics. In keeping the problems light and frothy, the puzzles veer too close to simple. A letter of missing words, for example, can be solved through context. An identikit face is pieced together not from memory, but because the facial contours align. Unsolvable puzzles would be no use, or fun, in a competitive party game, but tougher time limits would add a bit of panicked energy into the proceedings.

The slim number of puzzles and the rate at which gold medals are awarded harms *Blue Toad*'s party mode more. Not only must four players make do with a meagre three puzzles each, but games can easily end in deadlock. *Buzz!* understood that the best way to bring a sofa of four together was to pit them directly against one another; polite turn-taking, while more befitting the genteel surroundings of Little Riddle, isn't conducive to a party atmosphere. Even with intermittent memory games and the ultimate whodunnit adding bonus points, there's little to fight for. Instead, each sleuth sits through three rounds of puzzling and wittering until their next turn.

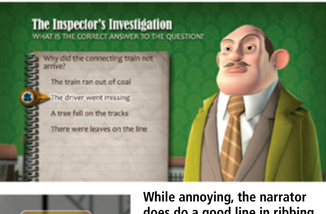
Too irritating to satisfy as interactive fiction and too gentle to evoke competition, on the evidence of the first two episodes, the question isn't whodunnit, but whydoit? **[4]**

Cut-throat pricing

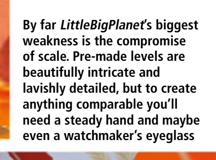


The issue of pricing must be raised. In the UK, an introductory £10 gives you the first two episodes, with the subsequent four £6.49 each. Considering each features 12 puzzles, this 'double pack' still equates to 41p per puzzle. Compare it to *Professor Layton And Pandora's Box*'s hefty compendium of 150 – plus downloads – and it seems a little stingy. And even with so few puzzles, Relentless struggles to find ways of anchoring them in the plot. Episode two sees your mother posting you conundrums. Do we look so starved of mental taxation?





While annoying, the narrator does do a good line in ribbing should you fail a task. Where Layton gently encourages another go, *Blue Toad*'s host has no qualms in calling you a loser



By far *LittleBigPlanet*'s biggest weakness is the compromise of scale. Pre-made levels are beautifully intricate and lavishly detailed, but to create anything comparable you'll need a steady hand and maybe even a watchmaker's eyeglass



LITTLEBIGPLANET PSP

FORMAT: PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: SONY CAMBRIDGE

In every sense this is a tiny marvel. Considering the ambition and scope of the original it's good to see all the charm and sheer damn cuddly cuteness of the original crammed into pocket form, complete with its distinctive fabric Sackboy stars, papercraft world and the soothing tones of Stephen Fry to guide you.

The singleplayer experience stands up especially well to Sony Cambridge's miniaturisation as a vibrant and enjoyable standalone platformer. In many ways it benefits from the reduced scale. The simplistic 'leap to the end' gameplay, as you navigate levels avoiding hazards, could feel lightweight and shallow on PS3. Here, however, it's perfectly pitched for off-the-cuff bouts of time-killing. There's a pleasant variety, too, with everything from vehicles with mounted weapons to ingenious puzzle-filled mazes and surfboarding as a shark chases your wave.

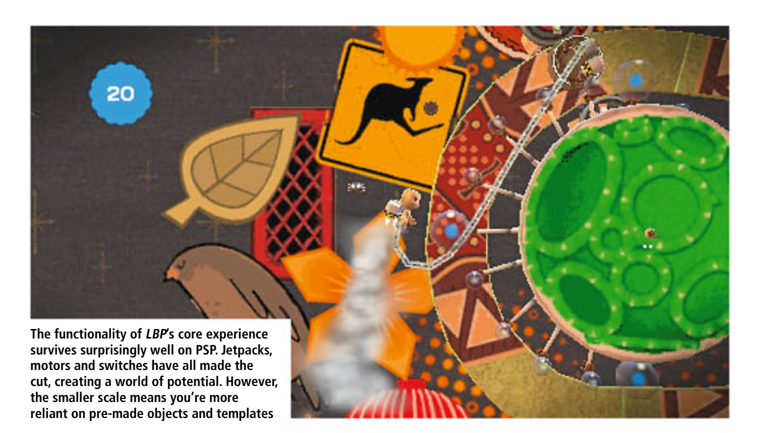
It's these more imaginaive moments that Sony hopes will inspire you to dip into *LBP*'s creative side. Which, unfortunately, is where ambition and technical limitations clash. Using the Popit, the visually driven menu that hovers above your Sackboy, you're able to access the tools and objects that enable you to build your own creations and levels. The most basic components are materials and shapes which can be used to literally block out floors and walls from varieties of sponge, stone and metal. Then there are the actuators – motors, switches, pulleys and pistons with settings for speed, strength or rotation that can be used to breathe life into your work.

Almost everything from the PS3 game has made the transfer, and anyone with even a basic understanding of how *LittleBigPlanet*'s tools work will find plenty of creations to admire and dissect in the enjoyable singleplayer levels. But while the overall content has mostly survived intact there are a few cuts, some of them major. For example, there are fewer options when creating shapes. In fact, trying to make anything beyond 'square with a pointy bit sticking out' is enough to make you need a lie down. The ability to select, copy and reuse objects is also hampered, reducing the speed at which you can throw together your ideas.

In the original, full-sized *LBP*, creating more than a few seconds of playable level was a significant and time-consuming effort. Here, with slightly reduced options and at a near microscopic scale, it's much, *much* harder. Even typing level descriptions using the D-pad and buttons is an effort. These limitations are evident in the range of half-finished and largely unplayable user-submitted creations we found online. It all points to one inescapable flaw: while technically accomplished and successful in capturing the guts and spirit of the original, it's hard to see why anyone would invest hours crafting their fabric homage to *Metroid* here, when the more versatile and accessible PS3 version is an option. **[6]**



Sackboy isn't as charming at 1/8th scale. Facial expressions fail to convey emotions and are often impossible to see. The dancing idle animations add some much-needed life



The functionality of *LBP*'s core experience survives surprisingly well on PSP. Jetpacks, motors and switches have all made the cut, creating a world of potential. However, the smaller scale means you're more reliant on pre-made objects and templates

Connected?



While getting your PSP online isn't exactly hard, it's perhaps the weakest part of this version of *LBP*. Multiplayer is entirely absent, while being tied to Wi-Fi or your PS3's wireless connection limits the potential to discover new levels or share your own while on the go. Short of using Starbucks' connection in the street, the community options are strictly limited to home access – ironic for a mobile console. It would be interesting to see how a similar offering would benefit from an always-connected platform like iPhone, a medium that would also offer a far more friendly and accessible interface.



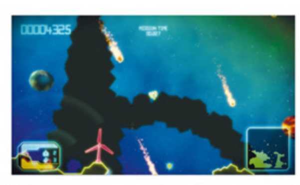
GRAVITY CRASH

FORMAT: PS3 (VERSION TESTED), PSP RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: JUST ADD WATER

What might mankind have achieved were it not for the inconvenience of gravity? Cheap intercontinental travel and advanced plumbing systems for a start. And, more importantly, not crashing fatally into planets every two or three minutes when playing tricky but addictive PSN shooters. The fizzing, neon-lit *Gravity Crash* is a reminder of what a cosmic shame gravity is, constantly tugging your thruster-powered spacecraft planetwards and forcing you to contend with perpetual course-altering drag.

In that respect it's not really a space shooter at all, despite being set against the twinkling darkness of the infinite (forgivable – it *is* quite pretty). Rather, it's a planet-surface shooter, with your pilot (a mischievous maintenance android whose character is revealed through playful inter-mission dialogue) charged with 'cleaning up' several galaxies by collecting gems, solving simple puzzles and blowing up enemy gun turrets and machinery.

Your basic and constant aim is to avoid crashing (you'll hold 'X' to engage thrusters almost all the time), and to master the movement of your craft: adjusting for downforce, often under pressure of enemy fire or dwindling fuel, is key. The game offers two control configurations: a two-stick move-and-fire system (the left stick for direction, the second to unleash your unlimited-ammo laser), and a more traditional but slightly tougher option in which the direction of fire is locked to the direction you're facing. Similarly,





Once the relatively short campaign is finished, a level editor extends *Gravity Crash*'s lifespan, with the opportunity to publish your own creations (and download those of other users) via PSN

you can set your shields to automatic (on all the time but depleted by contact and enemy fire) or manual (activated by L1 with a limited but self-replenishing charge). And whichever you choose, R1 will fire your secondary weapon, be it lightning bolt, homing missiles, EMP or plasma ball.

Whatever objective variation you're playing – collect these gems, destroy these buildings – the game offers a feeling of swimming constantly upstream. Consequently, everything you're asked do aside from surviving, from door-opening switch puzzles to boss fights, feels like a faculty-testing juggling act. It's a tautly designed mechanic that places players on the rack from the outset, stretching their abilities with each additional objective and enemy, and making for a stern, if unspectacular, challenge. **[7]**



Every object in *Gravity Crash*'s twilight world is colour-coded for ease of use: shoot at all the red stuff, save the green stuff (landing carefully to pick up survivors), and collect just about everything else

PIXELJUNK SHOOTER

FORMAT: PS3 RELEASE: OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE DEVELOPER: Q-GAMES



Balancing your ship's heat meter is a key concern. Firing your weapon (especially holding fire to let loose your more powerful rockets) and hovering near lava or noxious gas fills a temperature gauge

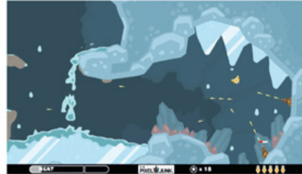
Q-Games' fourth PSN *PixelJunk* title is marvellously geared towards fun. Ostensibly, *PixelJunk Shooter* has much in common with *Gravity Crash*, since they both involve negotiating simple, rocky 2D worlds and shooting enemies – and both have origins in the likes of Atari's 1982 coin-op, *Gravitar* – but where *Gravity Crash* is full of precision flying and collision death, *Shooter* is a bright, solid world of big-fisted physics and obstacles that's designed to be enjoyed rather than survived.

Your mission is to fly through various subterranean caverns and passageways collecting stranded miners. Save them all and gates are unlocked allowing you to progress. Stopping you are natural hazards (lava pools, explosive gas, sheets of ice), simple element-themed enemies and your own twitchy trigger finger – laser more than five of the (non-) survivors in any single stage, or expose them to lethal conditions, and you'll have to restart.

This might sound very traditional, but the game is an elemental playground. The momentum of your manoeuvrable craft is not just manageable but positively user-friendly, and even if you do crash into walls your ship will remain undamaged. Lowering your winch to pull in stranded workers, which may have been a chore of tricky alignment, is actually a slapstick pleasure – the sticky chain whips out and scoops up targets like a hungry mechanical frog's tongue. And solving puzzles and reaching seemingly trapped miners is a matter of joyful physics play – shooting through soft rock to unleash a tide of sloshing cartoon water over a hissing, solidifying reservoir of magma, for example, or melting ice with laser fire rebounding off mirrors.

The game is rather short, with three worlds of five levels each, but it refuses to shortchange players with repetition. New ideas and elements are introduced to combine with and redefine others – winchable sponges that soak up and spew out lava or water, for instance, or magnetic oil which vaporises lava. The result is that *Shooter* feels accomplished and robust, a rounded and consistently enjoyable achievement. **[8]**





Not only is staying alive quite easy, but *Shooter* gives you unlimited retries and, in twoplayer, respawns you after ten seconds, so long as your partner (who may well have killed you in the first place) survives



FOREVER BLUE: UMI NO YOBIGOE

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW (JAPAN), Q1 2010 (UK)
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** ARIKA



Fish stroking is out, replaced with fish food balls. Sprinkling on to coral teases out shyer aquatic friends, but is not recommended in the Cortica River. We're not sure it's the flaky ball the piranha are really after

Forever Blue 2 announces its intentions in its opening minute: a pod of whales to your right, a submerged temple to your left. No time for carp massaging: this is *Forever Blue* à la Michael Bay. Arika even betrays its title by ignoring the original's expansive 'forever' for 'bits of blue', six snappy dips from around the globe. South Pacific, Aegean Sea, Arctic Ocean *and* the Antarctic. There's even a Brazilian river. It smacks of neat partitioning, impatient bite-sized oceans for fans of Blue Planet's 50-minute dives.

Perhaps the guiding hand, or editor's eye, of an Attenborough is what *Forever Blue* needed. 'Bigger is better' may jar with the yogic calm of the original diving sim, but it makes for a mostly tighter game. A quest for mystic stones doesn't impress itself on those content to fondle coral or find Nemo, and playing along sees Arika cash in on the alien spookiness of cavernous depths to neat effect. Logic scatters like so many angel fish when you discover a submerged mansion, but exploring its eerily preserved corridors as Enya-alikes warble to Morricone raises goose pimples.

Only the new Pulsar device is an action concession too far. Used, confusingly, to both heal sick fish and hurt carnivores, shark zapping feels like playing a shooter with the turning circle of, well, a diver. It's a tiny hint of fuss in an otherwise exemplary Wii outing: shimmering vistas show what Nintendo's console is capable of, and WiiSpeak-enabled online co-op reminds us of functionality used only two times previously. Whether or not Arika's brash confidence suits *Forever Blue* is questionable, but it has every right to it. **[7]**



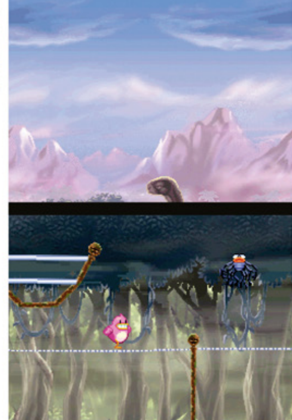
How the pulsar heals fish is a mystery. Aimed in firstperson, it harpoons animals with neon glowsticks. Find an ill enough batch and it eventually looks how you might imagine a Saturday night aquatic party



MAESTRO: JUMP IN MUSIC

FORMAT: DS **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NEKO ENTERTAINMENT
DEVELOPER: PASTAGAMES **PREVIOUSLY IN:** E207





The spider is one of several types of enemy that try to ruin your tunes – a sharp rap on the screen at just the right moment will send them flying

Take *Ouendan*, mixed with the barest smidge of *Guitar Hero* and *Rhythm De Run Run*: bring to the boil and reduce, adding classical standards and popular hits from yesteryear. Season with a hint of *Yoshi Touch & Go*. Voila: *Maestro*.

Maestro: Jump In Music is presented as a rhythm platformer, but there's little platforming to be done bar occasionally dropping down to bag some fruit. Presto, a charming pink bird, cracks through each level at a pace while you stroke, tap and twang the strings and circles that coalesce into a recognisable tune. There's nothing strictly new in any of *Maestro*'s elements, but it ends up feeling like its own game: the bright and cheery visuals, the slightly wonky version of Fame and the daft ramblings that bookend each level all add up.

The tunes are a good mix, most of them recognisable classical works from the big hitters – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Mozart, Tchaikovsky and Vivaldi pop up – and a smattering of stuff from the likes of Madness, The Animals and Leonard Bernstein. The former work better than the latter. It's largely practical: Pastagames has done a remarkable job of squeezing what it has from the hardware's limited audio capacity, but the classical works survive the simplification while something like ABC or the House Of The Rising Sun just sounds a little messy.

What *Maestro* does do is touch on that feeling of actually playing something, its variety of inputs and the way it isolates the key elements from the songs create a good enough approximation to absorb the player in its neat, offbeat world (we don't recommend playing it on a train, though). A few issues hold it back from greatness: the boss fights are rubbish, the odd stroke will make Presto drop off the screen when you didn't mean it (while missing notes as the game camera moves down before bringing you back up), and the game can only be played on Normal and Hard after you complete it on Easy. Baffling stuff, really. But *Maestro* doesn't outstay its welcome, and on those harder difficulties even conjures up flashes of magic. A welcome treat, then, albeit not a substantial one. **[7]**



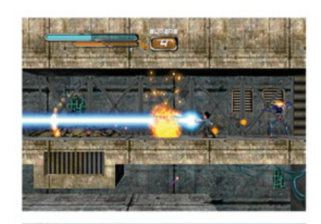
ASTRO BOY

FORMAT: DS, PSP, PS2, WII (VERSION TESTED)
RELEASE: OUT NOW (US), JANUARY 15 (UK)
PUBLISHER: D3 **DEVELOPER:** HIGH VOLTAGE

Built to replace a dead son, Astro Boy was unable to simulate human life beyond surface details and his father cast him out. A similar fate awaits *Astro Boy: The Videogame* – built in the image of Treasure's excellent GBA title *Omega Factor* but unable to connect with that game's quality beyond superficial structure. The action plays out in two phases, grounded brawling and aerial shooting, both focusing on charging super attacks by offing smaller cannon fodder with weedy lasers. But it is a doppelgänger in concept alone, a cold mechanical clone lacking Treasure's beating action heart.

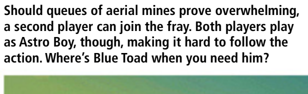
Street-level brawling is robotic in all the wrong ways. Astro's signature attacks are agonisingly long-winded; moves designed to impress in the confines of a static manga panel haven't been rethought for live-action. Regularly rooted to the spot, enemies line up to be hit. More manoeuvrable in the air, Astro's shooting is never more than a childish approximation of *Gradius*. With a zoomed-in camera view and big, fat projectiles (looking like deadly kidney beans) it is a side-scrolling shooter written in comic sans, laughable in the wake of Treasure's involvement with the franchise.

And whatever happened to High Voltage, creator of *The Conduit* and defender of Wii graphical standards? *Astro Boy* is strikingly ugly, clearly designed from PSP up, but lacking in the 'up' regard. Smeary textures and crude; jagged character models are the antithesis of Osamu Tezuka's razor-sharp clarity. Partial blame can be laid on the less-than-stellar CG film *Astro Boy* adapts, but considering High Voltage so vocally invoked *Omega Factor* during development, it is not unfair to hold the game to a higher standard. It doesn't come close. **[3]**





Strangely, a selection of hidden upgrades are totally undermined when, in level three, a cheat unlocks that allows you to max out Astro Boy's stats with a button press. Utterly baffling



Should queues of aerial mines prove overwhelming, a second player can join the fray. Both players play as Astro Boy, though, making it hard to follow the action. Where's Blue Toad when you need him?





INVIZIMALS

FORMAT: PSP **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SCEE **DEVELOPER:** NOVARAMA



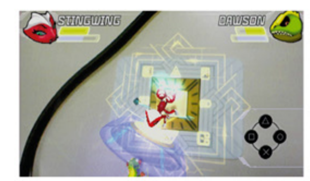
Special attacks are combat's only real concession to the camera tech. Shaking the camera or tracing a path can charge them up, while aiming the lens at monsters' weak points will help deflect others

Invizimals proposes that a race of tiny critters live beyond human perception in colourful surfaces. The only way to coax them out? With the PSP camera peripheral. We know this because Brian Blessed appears in-game to explain the rules. Although casting Blessed as an expert on anything beyond human perception reeks of joyful irony, he's actually denied any trademark bluster, a technobabble-filled script leaving him on muted form. The PSP camera similarly underperforms.

A colour is proposed and the hunt begins, searching for a fiery wasp in the glaring red of an unpaid council tax bill. Except the PSP camera isn't a hi-tech capture device forged in an Invizimal research centre: it is a flimsy lens that blurs and bleaches the world, not so much augmenting reality as disfiguring it. At best it is visually underwhelming, at worst rubbish, rendering real-world colours unusable and halting progress until you luck out or cheat with a handful of Dulux colour swatches.

The illusion of hidden life is stronger when the camera interacts with the packaged marker card. Moving around the card lets you inspect and poke at the well-made 3D models (a spider/disco-ball hybrid is particularly good) and forms the basis of the capturing process. Slapping the card to swat a fly or leaning to dodge an incoming fireball has the easy playfulness missing in exploration, although many activities take longer to explain than complete – a cardinal sin for minigames.

If only the concept stretched further. Once Invizimals are caught they battle in a poor man's Pokémon. Novarama can't decide between an elemental rock-paper-scissors system or a realtime action brawl; the final mix sits uncomfortably between the two, shuddering under the weight of overpowered special attacks. Fussiness hinders playfulness. The inadequacies of the PSP camera shatter what little illusion is conjured. At one point, Brian Blessed *whispers*. All is not right in the world. **[5]**



Battles focus entirely on balancing stamina and health. Attacking and defending both eat into stamina: do you sacrifice defence to rush in first or play the waiting game? What would Brian do?



15
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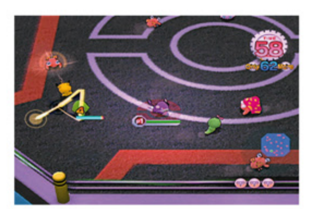
POKÉMON RUMBLE

FORMAT: WII **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: NINTENDO **DEVELOPER:** AMBRELLA



Pokémon Rumble appears to have been formed out of a misunderstanding over what it is that has made the franchise such an enduring phenomenon. In attempting to give a more physical slant to the series by reimagining it as a hack-and-slasher, Ambrella has put all its weight behind the 'Gotta Catch 'Em All' tagline, allowing the player to amass an army of up to 1,000 critters. But what it didn't factor into the design is that kleptomaniacs rarely bother collecting items without emotional gravitas, and this oversight becomes immediately obvious when you compare *Rumble* to its source material.

In Pokémon RPGs, it was inevitable that bonds would form between the player and their brood as they grew through nurture. But here, Pokémon are forever fixed at the level at which they are discovered, and as such are utterly disposable. This is even before you consider the risible storyline, which explains that these Pokémon are merely wind-up facsimiles.



Each Pokémon can learn up to two attacks; these abilities aren't uniform and can differ even among members of the same species, but the low difficulty renders this a moot point



Pokémon are 'befriended' by delivering large amounts of damage. They can be swapped out as many times as you like per level, but if any three fall during combat, the round is failed

Because the stats rise at an rapid rate as the game progresses, you'll rarely go more than 30 seconds before uncovering a creature stronger than your current model. As such, you flit between toys like a spoiled child at Christmas, with old favourites sliding ever further down the list until they're too weak even to be eligible for the next round. Having outlived their usefulness, old Pokémon can almost tragically be traded in for pennies at a nearby terminal, which can be used to obtain rare or powerful Pokémon from a nearby egg machine, or to teach a Pokémon a new move – although with a more powerful variant lurking literally around the next corner, this is an exercise in futility until you reach the business end of the 'S' rank.

Rumble does offer amusement in limited doses, but only because it's a flatterer; as the numbers above creatures' heads rise, it creates an illusion of progression. But really it's a button-masher of the simplest kind, and one that – like its Pokémon – is impossible to love for long. **[4]**



GYROMANCER

FORMAT: 360, PC **RELEASE:** OUT NOW
PUBLISHER: SQUARE ENIX **DEVELOPER:** POPCAP/SQUARE ENIX

It's easy to assume that *Gyromancer* is a clone of *Puzzle Quest*: a dainty retread of Infinite Interactive's flawed but addictive match-three RPG. The truth, perhaps, is that it's simply an improvement on the formula. *Gyromancer*'s designers have almost certainly been studying the older game quite closely, but with a mind to solving its glaring problems.

Problems like AI. One of the more cyclical conversations in videogaming is whether *Puzzle Quest*'s computer enemies are shameless cheats or just an unbalanced mess. Either way, a rival's comical ability to link together impossible chains while you struggle to get a move in edgeways is hardly the most charming of features. *Gyromancer* side-steps this issue with an elegant system that pits you against yourself: your in-game enemies take no moves for themselves, but they power up with yours, meaning that the only way to give yourself any advantage is to make your matches count, focusing on the gems that earn your character perks, while ridding the board of any that help your rival. In a move Alexey Pajitnov would probably appreciate, it's your own inefficiency that gives your foes an opening.

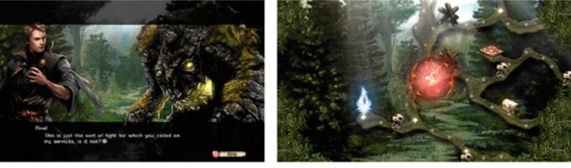
That's the ingenious core of a collaboration (it can feel like a collision) between the world's greatest casual-game developer and the demi-god of JRPGs. It's probably best if you try not to see the joins in this particular co-production, as you're likely to form the uncharitable opinion that PopCap provided everything smart, satisfying and generous, while Square had its hands full with the grind-blur battle transmissions and bits that, in general, you can skip through by pressing B.

However the partnership worked, *Gyromancer*'s predictable magic does what it's meant to, the casual game (it's essentially *Bejeweled Twist*) at the heart of the package turning RPG battles into a compulsion, while the delirious, arterial muddle of more convoluted systems provides you with all the affinities, stat-comparisons and item management you could realistically want.

The story's inane, the map is wretched, and what passes for a tutorial is an absolute disaster, but *Gyromancer* proves that mechanics will always rise above such concerns. A dangerous blend of creature-collecting, character-levelling and tight exploration was never likely to fail, then, and guess what? It hasn't. **[7]**



Match gems to power up your special moves, allowing you to fling attack gems on to the battlefield. Enemies will place their own countdown jewels, which must be removed before they go off



***Gyromancer* DLC featuring new maps was available on the day of release, which is difficult to applaud. Fortunately, the game comes packed with enough challenges to keep you busy for quite a while anyway**



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TIME EXTEND

FAHRENHEIT

FORMAT: **PC, PS2, XBOX**
PUBLISHER: **ATARI**
DEVELOPER: **QUANTIC DREAM**
ORIGIN: **FRANCE**
RELEASE: **2004**





Quantic Dream's difficult second title is equal parts inspired and ridiculous. It may look outside its medium, but Fahrenheit is a game to its fiery core

"You won't be just looking around you in *Fahrenheit* – you'll also have to interact with your environment," advises a digital **David Cage** in the game's opening tutorial, as if that were something that any gamer should need to be told. A prompt shows how to open a door with the right analogue stick. "Do it slowly to really feel you're controlling your character's hand." Like much of *Fahrenheit*, it conjures feelings of mixed affection and mild embarrassment.

Here is a game that's trying to do something different, really trying, but it's so painfully self-conscious that it trips over itself with heartbreaking frequency. When it does get things right, though, *Fahrenheit* opens our eyes to a new way of experiencing videogames – particularly, how they might deal with the troubling juxtaposition of a fixed narrative with a wilful player.

Fahrenheit was an attempt to get away from the preoccupations with guns, cars, breakneck pace and superficial emotions that Cage perceived as the medium's constraints. It was intended to be a developed story, one that the player could bend and mould subtly, engage with and feel intertwined with on more than the base level that compels us to rescue the princess, defeat the bigger baddie or find the next checkpoint. The irony is that in trying to get away from the traditional definition of what a videogame ought to be, Quantic Dream managed to create something that was unmistakably, irredeemably a videogame – a bizarre, incongruous science-fiction tale of sentient AI, global paranormal conspiracy and slow-motion action sequences, told largely through minigames and QTEs.



The 24-inspired multiple-frame shots are the most effective integration of cinematic influences into the game – still entirely interactive, they bridge the gap between film and game instead of emphasising it.

Fahrenheit gets us to relate to its characters in a more effective way than film is able to – by making us a part of their intimate lives

Fahrenheit's cinematic ambitions are clear from the outset, when the digital Cage guides you through its 'first day of shooting' in the most preposterously self-aware tutorial in gaming history, and from real-life Cage's name dropping: Hitchcock, Lynch, Brazil, Dark Water, Jacob's Ladder. It cloaks Start, Quit and New Game cutely but obviously as Play, Stop and New Movie. It drops token literary references too, to Thus Spoke Zarathustra and The Tempest (its ominous black birds might even recall Poe's Raven), but Cage's love affair is with cinema, and nothing else. In the context of a game that presents itself as an interactive movie, such videogame staples as button prompts and collectibles feel like awkward, frivolous toys dropped arbitrarily into an otherwise sombre setting.

From the outset, then, *Fahrenheit* is clearly a game at odds with itself and with its medium. The token attempt to keep the player engaged in its many, many cutscenes through button prompts that only sometimes have anything to do with what's happening on the screen is at best mildly awkward, and at worst frustrating and disengaging.

Elsewhere, though, *Fahrenheit* gets us to relate to its characters in a more effective way than film is able to – by making us a part of their intimate lives. We guide Lucas, Carla and Tyler through the most ordinary everyday events – taking a shower, answering the phone, searching for keys, getting





How did you behave during *Fahrenheit*'s opening? Hide the body, dump the weapon, clean the floor and sit calmly back down? Or rush out without paying?

MIXED MESSAGES

For a game that's otherwise admirably progressive, *Fahrenheit* walks a precarious line with its female characters. Carla might be a go-getting, capable, careerist single cop, but we still get a shower scene, digi-David Cage gets to dance with her in her underwear, and at the end of the game she ends up in bed with Lucas for reasons that aren't remotely clear to anyone. Tyler's girlfriend Sam, meanwhile, is the very definition of a backwards stereotype: whiny, possessive and moody. Sam's Dance, the horrific striptease to which she 'treats' Tyler on their anniversary, is possibly the most excruciating cutscene of any videogame, ever.

dressed, hunting for wine glasses in kitchen cupboards. Lucas can die, not from falling off a ledge or getting in the way or a bullet, but because we've failed to take care of him, to pay attention to the tiny little things that keep his sanity; something as simple as washing his hands and face in the morning or taking a drink in a spare moment can make the difference, later on, between success and suicide.

It's this revelry in the mundane that defines the experience of playing *Fahrenheit*, that shapes its storytelling far more than its well-shot cutscenes or its occasionally snappy dialogue. It's a story told and experienced largely through non-events. The opening murder is a dramatic set-piece, and the game's cutscenes are hardly lacking in action, but we spend most of the game embroiled in everyday and often quite laborious tasks. It creates a palpable sense of place, too; Lucas' lonely little flat, with its dull greys and browns, packing boxes, dank little bathroom and lone carton of milk in the fridge evokes understated sympathy for him.

Fahrenheit juxtaposes the mundane with the absurd, the out of the ordinary – it tells a story that no sane person could possibly relate through actions that are familiar to us all. The plot abandons any early semblance of authenticity the second Lucas is attacked by giant invisible computer-generated fleas in the bank and never looks back, spiralling into an increasingly insane and convoluted sequence of events – it's as if, unable to decide which plot thread to follow, Cage simply went for everything at once, from voodoo to sentient AI to possession, invisible murderers, global conspiracy theories, Mayan mythology, reincarnation, messianic prophecy and a very confused commentary on determinism. By the end, Lucas has been chased by imaginary angels and huge bugs, developed superpowers and uncovered a counter-conspiracy for world domination masterminded by tramps.

In the face of all its achievements, not least the fantastic opening in a diner restroom in the moments immediately following a murder, the most absurd moments unfortunately prove to be *Fahrenheit*'s most memorable. It's impossible to forget the unintentionally hilarious sequence





Were it not for the latter third of the game, Carla might be up there with Jade and Lara in the exclusive ranks of personable female videogame leads, but instead she's abandoned to sudden eyebrow-raising pregnancy

in which Carla finds herself trapped in an insane asylum in the dark (evidently she has a paralysing terror of sauntering shirtless men in orange trousers), or the scene where Lucas backflips over exploding cars for two minutes, or the moment when he randomly wakes up in a forest with a Mayan priest and gets chased by a panther.

The game's structure is prescriptive, but it manages to make the player feel like they have influence and choice, that what they do or don't do might change something. Even if practically none of your actions can affect the ultimate outcome, you feel like they might have. Nowhere is this better exemplified than in *Fahrenheit*'s famous opening

The game manages to make the player feel like they have influence and choice, that what they do or don't do might change something

Despite all the unadulterated nonsense, though, Cage can really write a thriller. There's just enough intrigue to push the player through even its most uncompromising moments. He can also write a good character, some of the time. At its best, *Fahrenheit* exemplifies some of the most natural characterisation in videogames, but also the most absurd. At one end of the spectrum we have Lucas' believable relationship with his ex, Tiffany, whose visit early in the game to collect the few things still left in Lucas' apartment can lead to a believably melancholy conversation and a sex scene which, though hardly touching, isn't out of place; by contrast, his sudden, awkward and entirely inexplicable love affair with Carla is horribly jarring.

Fahrenheit's chief triumph is the subtle layering of cause and effect that elegantly alters the flow of events. Consequences are laid almost imperceptibly on Lucas' shoulders. The way that your decisions can come back to haunt you – a missed bloodstain, a dropped piece of paper – is subtle and quietly brilliant. It also pulls a neat trick by forcing you to work towards your own downfall, putting you in control of both fugitive and pursuers and teasing you with the power to help or hinder the investigation.

sequence. The instinct, confronted with a dead body, is to either cover your tracks as painstakingly as possible or flee immediately, and the game not only accommodates both of these approaches, but everything in between. This, surely, is the key to natural interactive storytelling – a hint at how interactive stories might evolve, should game writers ever achieve mastery of their tools.

Fahrenheit is a story that absolutely couldn't be told any other way. It's strangely at home in its medium despite its milieu of incongruous elements. It didn't weave a believable and consistent tale, it didn't deliver a work of cinematic excellence, it didn't propel games into a new era of brilliantly empathic narrative. But it did harness a lot of the things that make games a unique and engaging medium for fiction and, almost by accident, it succeeds at being exactly what it didn't want to be – an example of videogames' traditional limitations as well as their potential.



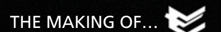
YOU'LL HAVE TO REPEAT THAT

There are several contenders for *Fahrenheit*'s greatest moment of absurdity. Is it the discovery that granny Agatha is actually a form taken on by the internet, which became self-aware in the '80s? Is it the secret organisation of tramps working against a vaguely Masonic network of the planet's most powerful beings? The superfluous revelation that Lucas was irradiated in the womb by some otherworldly artefact? The final Matrix-esque airborne fights? Or perhaps Carla's sudden pregnancy, delivered as the game's parting shot to narrative continuity? And we never did find out where those giant fleas came from.



The scene in the frozen park where Lucas must choose whether to rescue or abandon a drowning boy is typical of videogame moral choices – it's not so much a decision between being good and evil as whether to be a saint or an absolute scumbag. *Fahrenheit* is a more effective game when it tasks you with making more ordinary choices





THE MAKING OF... DIABLO

With just one click, Diablo's creators reduced the RPG to the bare minimum – and Blizzard liked it so much, it even bought the company

FORMAT: **MAC, PC** PUBLISHER: **BLIZZARD ENTERTAINMENT** DEVELOPER: **CONDOR GAMES/IN-HOUSE** ORIGIN: **US** RELEASE: **1996**

The world of game development is littered with sour tragedies: great ideas that went awry due to mismanagement, ideas that were never that great in the first place getting painfully – publicly – euthanised. It's a pleasure, then, to consider *Diablo*, a title for which the stars aligned, and a team of friends landed themselves with a sympathetic publisher that genuinely understood the concept. Even the tricky mid-project acquisition of the company couldn't damage the final product. It helps, of course, that the end result wasn't bad either. *Diablo* went on to redefine a sub-genre of the RPG, the top-down dungeon crawler, with a mixture of visceral combat and loot hoovering that played out, in the words of art lead **Erich Schaefer**, as a series of "simple pleasures".

Simple, as it happens, would be the operative word for *Diablo*. "Back then, RPGs were so overwrought with statistics that the genre had shrunk to a tiny audience," says Erich's brother and Condor's co-founder, **Max Schaefer**. "We wanted to do an RPG how we'd played Dungeons & Dragons as kids: hit monsters and gain loot. Our mission was that we wanted the minimum amount of time between when you started the game up to when you were clubbing a skeleton."

Condor, the company that would create *Diablo*, was founded in 1993, and hit a quirky seam of good luck early on. "We were just starting out with Dave Brevik and my brother Erich," says Max. "We were in Brevik's house and he'd just quit his job with Iguana Entertainment. We're having our first meeting: what's our company going to work on, how are we going to make money? The phone rings, and it's someone from SunSoft who heard Dave was free and had some projects. So on our first meeting we ended up getting our first job. We looked at each other and said: 'Is this real?'"

Forging a deal with SunSoft, Condor started work on the Mega Drive version of *Justice League Task Force*, a *Street Fighter II* clone using DC Comics' ageing cast. The team was clearly on something of a roll, as *Task Force* quickly lead to another piece of unlikely fortune. "SunSoft had another company doing the SNES version," laughs Max. "It turned out they were the Blizzard boys. We finally met them at a game show, and we got to talking. We became friends straight away, and mentioned to them we were interested in PC projects. They'd just released *WarCraft*, and their owner said: 'We want some more PC development'. Perfect timing all over again."

> "We wanted to do a roleplaying game in the style of how we'd played Dungeons & Dragons as kids: hit monsters and gain loot"

The question of what to pitch was an easy one for Condor to answer. "*Diablo* was an idea that I worked on for a long time," says lead programmer **Dave Brevik**. "I started working on it in high school around 1985. The design changed over time, but the biggest influence was playing *Moria* and *Angband* on Unix machines."

"For me, the most direct

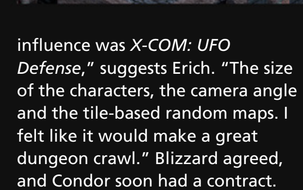


Nothing else looks quite like *Diablo*: the visuals may mark it out as coming from a particular period of history, but the muted backdrops with elaborate bursts of magical violence ensure that it remains singularly easy to recognise



While Blizzard toils away advancing the franchise with *Diablo III*, anybody wondering what the original *Diablo* might look like today should definitely give *Torchlight* a whirl. With a development team rich with Blizzard DNA, it's a refined and beautiful singleplayer experience









DIABLO AND GROMIT

For a brief, rather worrying, period, *Diablo* was going to have 'claymation' graphics, a prospect that now fills Max Schaefer with a quiet embarrassment: "I should state right off that we didn't go very far down this road. But it's something we looked into as a way of efficiently animating characters. There was a dinosaur-based fighting game [*Primal Rage*] that had actually used models like this. We thought maybe we could do that to save time. It was, needless to say, a fairly short experience. The lighting's never quite right, the backgrounds never look good: it would have been a disaster."

influence was *X-COM: UFO Defense*," suggests Erich. "The size of the characters, the camera angle and the tile-based random maps. I felt like it would make a great dungeon crawl." Blizzard agreed, and Condor soon had a contract.

The game's central concept – loot and monsters without the waiting – was never in question, but that doesn't mean it emerged fully formed. Surprisingly, the ultimate action-RPG was originally turn-based. "At first we had it so that you would take a step and then the monsters would," says Erich. "You would swing your sword and then the monsters got their chance. I think this was based on the *Nethack* or *Rogue*-style of game that Brevik liked a lot."

Blizzard suggested switching to realtime combat, and a huge piece of *Diablo* fell into place. "The moment I put the change in, clicked on a skeleton and my character walked over and smacked it to pieces, the clouds parted," says Brevik, who locked himself in his office for a week to rewrite the necessary code. "The magic was found."

With the game starting to take shape, there were still plenty of hurdles to overcome. Like *X-COM*, *Diablo* would use randomised content, handing over certain elements of the dungeon designs to the CPU itself: the coding equivalent of Russian roulette. The system had to be able to create maps that weren't mangled, impersonal disasters. "This was the big differentiator between what was traditional and what was different to *Diablo*," says Brevik. "Randomisation was very hard to implement because we didn't have any tools to do this. The secret was iteration. We just played and tweaked the content over and over again."

With a fairly loose structure, team members often shared roles, but, by and large, Brevik handled programming duties while the Schaefers controlled the look and feel of the game, with Max also managing the business. Certain elements, however, like the control system which pared movement, fighting and picking through loot down to a couple of mouse clicks, was something that everyone could come together on. "We always wanted to keep your options simple: left button, right button, and a few keys," Brevik explains.

Erich agrees: "We didn't want anything to get in the way of what some developers dismiss as 'the grind'. Instead we focused almost solely on the grind, trying to make it fun to kill the same monsters over and over again. What we cared about was the tactile feel of smashing skeletons and constant sense of exploration. Mouse control seemed natural, although there was a lot of iteration. We noticed that anyone could pretty much play, even people's moms."

"Making a game simple for the player is actually harder for the developer," suggests Max. "One of our philosophies was to make it a reward-based rather than penalty-based game. A lot of RPGs fell into the trap of penalties: you don't eat and you die, everything you find is a penalty. With us, it even feels good to pick up a potion in the inventory and put it back down."

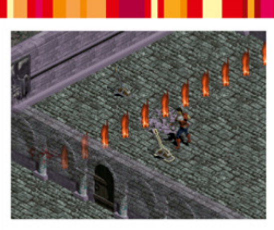
Six months from the shipping date, and even though the game was coming together, Condor was running into financial trouble. Low on operating funds and in real danger of closure, help came from Blizzard itself, which offered to











DARK ARTS

As with the mechanics itself, the Schaefers had a few simple goals with the game's art style. "What we were looking for was a good contrast between environment and characters," says Max. "Environments for us were very grey and muted, because that would set off the fire and blood all the better. We put quite a bit of work into the tone of it. Fairly early on we wanted to do a gothic, dark game, with fantastical monsters and fantastical effects. I think we pretty much nailed that."

buy the studio, turning it into Blizzard North in the process. "The offer was unexpected, but very welcome," laughs Erich. "The taxman was literally at the door, threatening to shut us down."

"We clicked with the people so well," says Brevik. "Our ideas were exactly like theirs. Making great games was in our blood. That made it easy to agree to."

With the sale, the development of *Diablo* changed considerably. "At this point the budget was very low," admits Max. "Under half a million dollars. Once we were acquired, we sat down to work out what we could do now we were free from budgetary constraints and had a little extra time. How could we make this as big as possible? That's where Battle.net came in."

Blizzard South's Battle.net system would allow for free internet matchmaking in a game which had originally been designed as a LAN-based multiplayer title. "Battle.net was coming together just as we were getting towards the end," says Max. "We thought it was a great idea: that you could push this button and play against anyone in the world seemed like science fiction. This is an era when you were typing in IP addresses to connect with anyone. *Diablo* was still peer-to-peer, however, so there was loads of cheating. Hacking was something that we didn't think people would bother doing. It was foreign to us to have a hit game, to have a million people playing. It meant that thousands of people were cheating, and we were totally unprepared for it."

Max admits that Battle.net was incorporated in a "fairly chaotic" manner but, cheating aside, it contributed hugely to the appeal of a game that was quickly becoming more successful than anyone had imagined. "There was a moment we started to suspect *Diablo* might be big," he remembers. "We were developing it in relative anonymity, and we got the chance to be on a Windows demo disc. We didn't think anything of it and then, overnight, the phone just started ringing off the hook. At least then we knew we weren't going in completely the wrong direction."

> "It was foreign to us to have a million people playing. Thousands of people were cheating, and we were totally unprepared for it"

Massive sales followed, and with them came clones, expansions and a sequel. From quest givers with an exclamation mark over their heads to randomised dungeons and item drops, almost every aspect of *Diablo* was copied in some way as rivals raced to make the next game that felt genuinely '*Diablo*esque'.

Leaving Blizzard shortly after the release of *Diablo II*, the Schaefers and Brevik were actually among those rivals, joining up with fellow Blizzard alumnus Bill Roper to form Flagship Studios and work on *Hellgate: London*, a third- and firstperson dungeon crawler with its own procedurally generated environments.

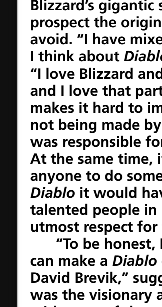
Saddled with muddled payment options and a confused release, the game was, to put it mildly, not a success. "I learned more from my experience with Flagship than I did making the first *Diablo*," laughs Brevik, who is now studio director at Gazillion Entertainment, developing *Marvel Universe Online*. "We didn't have the same company fall-back options we did at Blizzard, the design wasn't as cohesive, we had challenges in making a whole separate networking company to support us. In the end we over-reached."

"Flagship was a good shot at the moon that almost worked," agrees Erich. "I blame myself more than anyone, as I had final say on the design. I really hate that Bill Roper took so much heat, because he was a constant advocate for the team and the players. But you move on to the next thing."

For the Schaefers, that's *Torchlight*, a beautifully crafted singleplayer dungeon crawler with caricatured environments and a deep loot system. "We're doing this stuff much better now, with better planning and tools," laughs Max. "I guess we've found that what we do well in life is make action-RPGs." He pauses for a second. "So we're going to stick with that."



THIRD TIME'S A CHARM



While the first two instalments in the *Diablo* series are still popular wherever netbooks are found, Blizzard's gigantic sequel is a prospect the original team can't avoid. "I have mixed emotions when I think about *Diablo III*," says Brevik. "I love Blizzard and *Diablo* so much and I love that part of my life, it makes it hard to imagine a *Diablo* not being made by the team that was responsible for the first two. At the same time, if I would trust anyone to do something with *Diablo* it would have been the very talented people in Irvine. I have the utmost respect for those people."

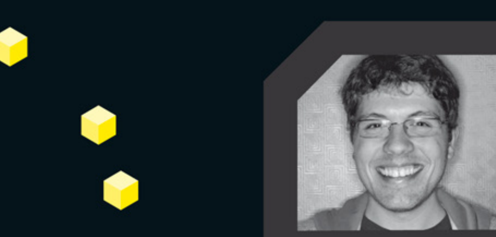
"To be honest, I don't think you can make a *Diablo* game without David Brevik," suggests Erich. "He was the visionary and he came up with most of the magic. Probably I'm the only one, but whatever Blizzard comes up with, for that reason, I don't think I will ever view it as a true sequel. But I'm sure it will be fantastic. I still know a lot of the staff and have total confidence in Blizzard's skills and development philosophy. I love what I see so far and I'm glad we aren't competing head-to-head. That reminds me: if they still take my calls, maybe I can get a beta copy…"





The UI is one of *Diablo*'s most iconic features, and was something of a challenge for the art team to put together. The solutions lay with constant iteration and in-house discussion: playtesting was a huge part of the process too





The rush to get connected

Few areas of gaming technology are more competitive than iPhone social gaming, with over half a dozen rivals in the hunt to be number one



Jason Citron, co-founder, Aurora Feint



Marc Gumpinger, CEO, Scoreloop



Volker Hirsch, strategic advisor, Scoreloop



Gareth Reese, lead architect, Crystal

Johnny Coghlan, head of publishing, Chillingo

Of all the ironies of mobile gaming, the greatest is that, despite being played on a device designed for mass communication, the vast majority of experiences have been entirely solitary.

Thankfully, this is one of the many obstacles removed by the emergence of Apple's iPhone as a viable mobile gaming platform.

Indeed, there's currently a fierce land-grab going on between half a dozen companies who want to own what's known as the social gaming network market. These are technology platforms provided freely to game developers who integrate them into their titles, gaining Xbox Live-style features such achievements, leaderboards, friend lists and gamer profiles.

"Before computers, no one in their right mind wanted to play on their own. You played with other people. This only changed because of technical constraints, not because people didn't want to play socially," muses **Volker Hirsch**, a mobile gaming veteran, who's recently entered the fray as a strategic advisor to German/US outfit Scoreloop.

"Now those constrains are falling away, the social element is coming back. In terms of mobile games, however, it's early stages, so we're seeing a lot of trial and error, as well as a lot of innovation. Still, I think we're just seeing the tip of the iceberg in terms of how this technology can be used, especially when it goes cross-platform; beyond iPhone and combines smartphones such as Android."

The company that kickstarted the sector was US developer Aurora Feint. Started by two graduates, **Jason Citron** and Danielle Cassley, it released one of the first connected iPhone games in late 2008 with its title *Aurora Feint II: The Arena*.

In terms of gameplay, it is an apparently basic match-three puzzler with RPG elements, but its success comes from online features such as the ability to play against the ghost data of other players, as well as leaderboards and realtime chat.

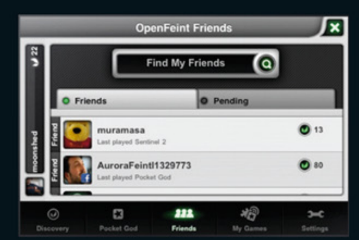
The technology behind this developed into an open-source connected platform called OpenFeint, with hooks into the evolving Apple iPhone OS SDK, as well as Facebook and Twitter. It was made available for other developers to use in March.

"We realised that every game, online or not, has a community, but nobody was enabling these player communities," Citron explains. "We also knew that games on Facebook had access to profiles, walls, chat, etc, while Xbox Live had leaderboards and achievements, so we thought: 'What if we brought social features



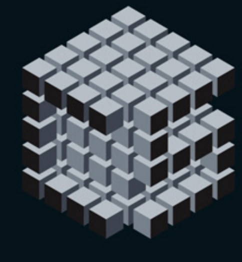
Chillingo's Crystal platform should shake up the market thanks to its focus on casual gaming as well the number of games that Chillingo will no doubt use it in. However, it has not yet been released, as demonstrated by this mocked-up screenshot of how the service will look







OpenFeint remains the market leader for social gaming networks on iPhone thanks to a combination of first-mover advantage and an ease of use for developers. Two of the first games to use Scoreloop's new white label take on social networking, which offers deeper integration and customised user interfacing, were *Parachute Panic* and *Pee Monkey Jungle Fire* (right)



and gaming features together for every game?'"

OpenFeint quickly gained support from publishers such as Chillingo as well as powering million-selling iPhone games like *Pocket God* and *StickWars*. By the time it dropped its pricing model, going completely free in July, it was being used in over 100 games. The company now claims that over 300 OpenFeint games have been released, with another 700 in development.

"We were surprised how quickly OpenFeint was adopted," Citron says. "We didn't realise how many developers simply don't want to have to build all this technology themselves."

But nature abhors a monopoly, recent features have been more focused on developers than gamers. Noting that larger developers, publishers and media companies wanted full control over the look and feel of their games, Scoreloop announced a white-label service, through which its technology could be more deeply integrated with minimal use of the Scoreloop brand.

"We would like a mention of Scoreloop on the splash screen as happens with the gaming engines, but we don't require developers to show anything within the game," Gumpinger says. "The fact is, these companies invest a lot of resources into their user interface and brand and they are simply not willing to promote any other brand."



What would happen if Apple ever decided to release an official social networking platform?

and even before the mass success of OpenFeint, other companies were working on similar products.

One was Scoreloop, which offers similar features to OpenFeint in terms of providing developers with access to servers for leaderboards, achievements, gamers profiles and integration with Facebook and Twitter. Its main differentiators, however, are the ability to challenge your friends to beat your performance in Scoreloop-enabled games, as well as a virtual currency, earned by in-game performance or bought with real money.

"Everything we do is focused around challenges. We think it defines mobile social gaming," says the company's CEO, **Marc Gumpinger**. "Similarly, we came up with the idea for the virtual currency. You get some coins for free when you download games, invite friends or win challenges. It works because it adds value to a challenge."

Demonstrating the fast-moving nature of the market, Scoreloop's most

In fact, some publishers seem to have decided that the only way to ensure full control is to develop their own social networking technology. Gameloft has its Gameloft LIVE! solution, which is only used in its titles. To date, however, its feature-set is rather basic, offering little more than achievements and chat. No doubt more functionality including leaderboards and multiplayer will arrive with the release of multiplayer-enabled games such as *Modern Combat: Sandstorm* and *NOVA*.

Specialist iPhone publisher ngmoco has taken a slightly different tack with its Plus+ platform. It is available for other developers to use, although on a more restricted basis than the likes of OpenFeint and Scoreloop. It also uses it for its game publishing activities, setting up a label called Plus+ for thirdparty developers to join.

But perhaps the most significant development in this area comes from UK publisher Chillingo. As the most prolific publisher of iPhone games, with over 100 released on the App Store, Chillingo has experience using other social networks including OpenFeint and Agon Online, but decided to develop its own – the Crystal platform

"It works on multiple levels," says head of publishing **Johnny Coghlan**. "It's beneficial to us from a sales perspective, it benefits developers by offering an easy-to-integrate fully featured social networking SDK, and for consumers it improves the quality of the games we publish."

The last of the current wave of solutions to hit the market (indeed, it remains in beta), lead architect **Gareth Reese** says the ability to build a technology from scratch, while taking best practices from its rivals, will give Crystal an advantage.

"We spent a lot of time analysing the existing social networking platforms and we found them to be concentrated on the hardcore gamer," Reese says. "We want Crystal to be much more casual-focused."

This means features such as seamless log-in, automatic friend finding and matchmaking have received a lot of attention. Of course, until games supporting Crystal are released, it's impossible to tell how much it will disrupt the current market.

The elephant in the room for all of these companies, however, is what would happen if Apple ever decided to release an official social networking platform for its iPhone.

Such a unified approach would provide huge advantages for players as well as developers, as every player and game would be on the same network. Whether Apple has the appetite or the resources to attempt this is another question entirely, which leaves the market incumbents fighting it out for the mindshare of developers and gamers, while also looking to expand beyond iPhone to the likes of Android, Windows Mobile and Symbian, just in case.



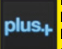
The contenders



AURORA FEINT
Product: OpenFeint
Funding: Part owned by Japanese giant DeNA
Launched: March 2009
Used by: 300 released games, 700 in development
URL: www.openfeint.com



SCORELOOP
Product: Scoreloop
Funding: €2 million in August 2009
Launched: April 2009
Used by: Various, including million-seller *Parachute Panic*
URL: www.scorelooop.com



NGMOCO
Product: Plus+
Funding: ngmoco raised $10 million in March 2009
Launched: August 2009
Used by: Games such as *Luxor* and *Eliminate*, as well as million-sellers such as *Flick Fishing* and *Skee-Ball*
URL: www.plusplus.com



CHILLINGO
Product: Crystal
Funding: Organic
Launched: TBA
Used by: TBA, but will be Chillingo and others
URL: www.crystalsdk.com

GAMELOFT
Product: Gameloft LIVE!
Funding: Organic
Launched: June 2009
Used by: Gameloft titles
URL: www.gameloftlive.com



AGON ONLINE
Product: Aptocore
Funding: Organic
Launched: April 2009
Used by: Over 100 games including *Inkvaders*, *Peter Und Vlad* and *The Creeps*
URL: www.agononline.com

GEOCADE
Product: Geocade
Funding: Organic
Launched: December 2008
Used by: Million-sellers such as *Paper Toss*, *Ragdoll Blaster* and *Enigmo*
URL: www.geocade.com

Studio profile

Like Top Trumps, but for game dev

COMPANY NAME: The Creative Assembly

DATE FOUNDED: 1987

NUMBER OF EMPLOYEES: 124

KEY STAFF: Tim Heaton (studio director), Mike Simpson (creative director), Ross Manton (producer), Jonathan Court (producer)



URL: www.creative-assembly.com

SELECTED SOFTOGRAPHY: *Shogun: Total War, Rome: Total War, Viking: Battle For Asgard, Empire: Total War*



Viking: Battle For Asgard **(top), from 2008, and *Napoleon: Total War,* due for release in February**





LOCATION: Horsham, West Sussex

CURRENT PROJECTS: *Total War* series

ABOUT THE STUDIO:

"The Creative Assembly is the development team behind the hugely successful *Total War* franchise. From *Shogun*, through to *Rome* and the forthcoming *Napoleon: Total War*, The Creative Assembly has continued to develop an award-winning series of titles. Recent releases include the acclaimed *Viking: Battle For Asgard* on console and the epic and top-selling *Empire: Total War* on PC.

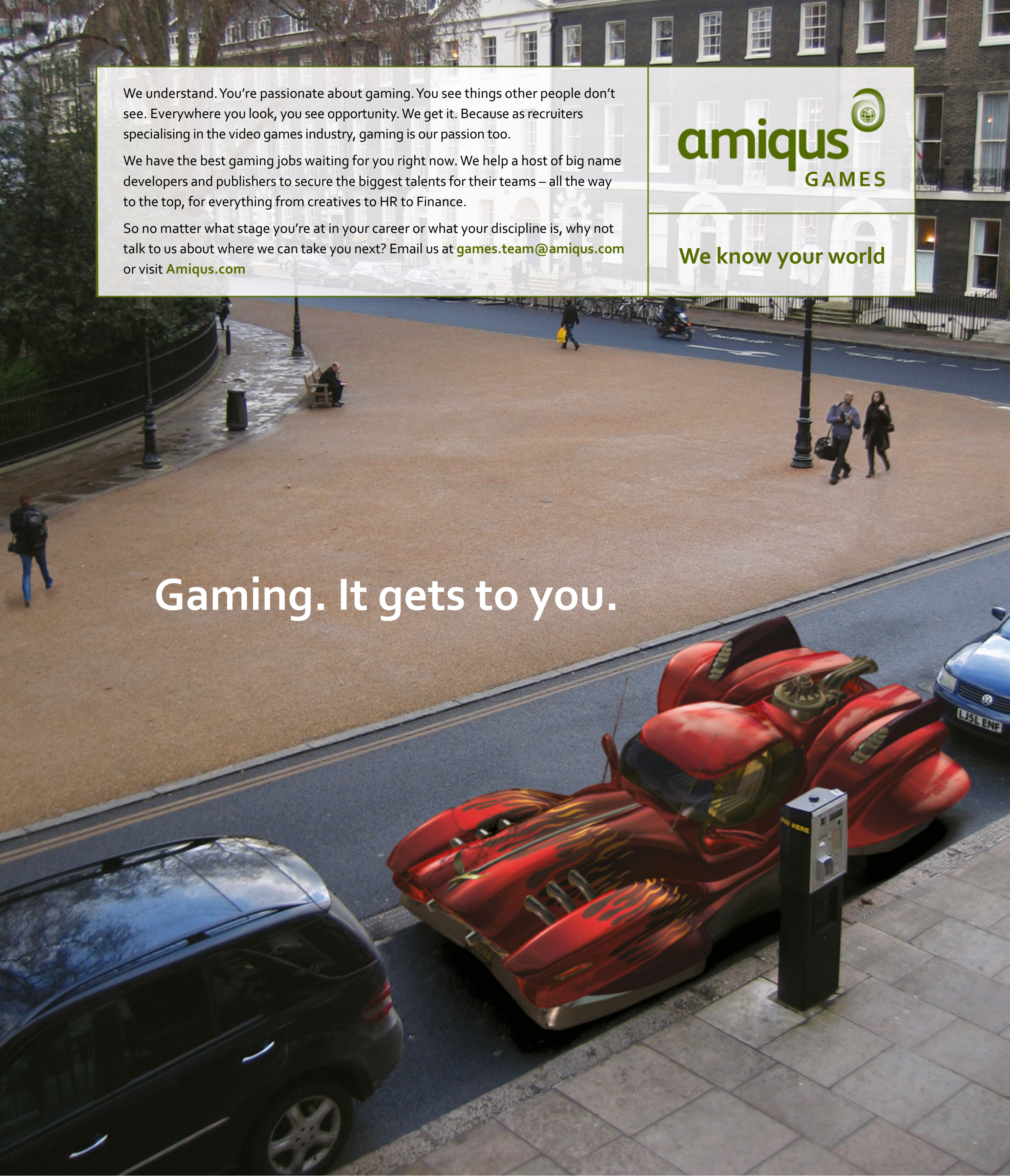
"Continuing to push the boundaries, *Napoleon: Total War* is the studio's most accomplished title to date. With cutting-edge graphics, three story-driven campaigns powered by the new AI director, improved realtime land and naval battles and unparalleled multiplayer modes, *Napoleon: Total War* will have plenty to offer seasoned generals and newcomers alike when it marches to stores in February.

"The BAFTA award-winning studio has an outstanding historical record and a unique combination of vision and talent combined with the backing of one of the world's largest publishers, Sega. This powerful synergy allows The Creative Assembly to craft some of the most exciting and immersive games available.

"Currently working on broadening the *Total War* brand, and on an unannounced console title, the studio is a hub of creativity and innovation, drawing on the best talent from around the world. Offering countryside and all the facilities of a modern town, its home of Horsham is also easily accessible from London, Brighton and Guildford.

"With industry-leading titles and a world-class reputation, significant levels of investment and a highly skilled team, The Creative Assembly continues to grow and to treat quality as its priority."


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THE UNIVERSITY OF HULL

GAMES EDUCATION WITH A REPUTATION

Below is a small selection of the games that Hull graduates have worked on...







BSc / MEng Computer Science with Game Development
MSc Games Programming
MSc Graphics Programming

Employers say:

"Hull University offers a course that provides its students with highly relevant industry skills and pushes them to excel in an energetic environment. It's great to see students that not only meet the expectations of a highly competitive job market, but raise that bar still further."

Tom Williams: Technical Director - Blackrock Studio

Graduates say:

"After some years working as a programmer in small games companies, I decided to attend the MSc in Games Programming at Hull University to improve my CV and academic skills. It was probably the best investment of my life. Five months before the end of the course I got a job offer and now I'm working as a programmer for a AAA studio."

Manuele Bonanno: MSc Graduate 2008

For more quotes from ex-students, examples of student work and syllabus information please visit: www.mscdegrees.com



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HI, I'M RANDY Videogame design, etc

(sad) (hesitant) Sheriff Simms now has the state "dead"

BY RANDY SMITH

On one hand you've got static, pre-authored dialogue trees, which are seriously limited in the amount of freedom they can provide. On the other, natural language processing (NLP), which would work great if it wasn't all but impossible to implement. Those extremes aren't promising, but there's been plenty of activity in the middle. *Façade*. *Galatea*. *The Sims*. *Masq*. *Siboot*. *Ultima*. *Civilization*. Quantic Dream. BioWare. Bethesda.

Might as well analyse *Fallout 3*, since it's having trouble not winning every award imaginable lately. *Fallout*'s conversation trees are dynamic in that they vary depending on your character's stats and behaviour. Like if you have the Child At Heart perk, your Karma is Very Evil, you've discovered the ID tags of a dead woman and you're holding a toaster, then you're able to tell the orphan that his mom Janet is trapped inside the toaster and will come back from the dead if he can free her (notice to politicians: don't go after Bethesda – I just made that up). So the player has input via game actions and choices; if you want to say something special then you must 'unlock' that dialogue option. Since the designers can craft sophisticated dynamics between the regular game and the conversation, such as encouraging players to sign up for quests that are over their head, you get a feeling that overall such an interaction can have a lot of range.

Though dynamic, those dialogue trees are still pre-authored. I've experienced the potential for drama-drenched moments in *Fallout 3*, like when I failed to save the sheriff's life but looted his keys thinking I'd finally have a safe place to sleep, then entered his house to discover, to my heart-wrenching shock, a young boy. At which point, I wanted to ask: "Oh no, are you the sheriff's son?" And then say: "I'm so sorry. I have horrible news for you." However, my dialogue options were written as though I'd met the son previously and he'd already heard about his dad's fate from some jerk who sprinted from the scene of the crime to the house even faster than I did. This isn't because Bethesda is unaware of these cases, it's because pre-authoring dialogue to cover every possible combination of variables is too much of a brute-force approach and bumps up against technical limitations.

But how can I craft my own dialogue if we've already skewered the dream of NLP and real AI? A starting point is adding more types of direct input, such as selecting moods or tones of voice, so at least I can choose between being gentle versus harsh when talking to the sheriff's son. You can also time the player's responsiveness, a class of input I term 'microexpressions', not quite a full player action but mineable for meaning regardless. Combining these techniques might allow the player to author the difference between a firm and immediate "NO!" versus a hesitant "I guess not" and anything in between as analogue flavour on what would otherwise be a single discrete option.

What if you could say "I really hate ____" and could fill in the blank with any game noun – person, place, or thing? Do you know anything about blank? When is the last time you saw blank? Are you related to blank? Or fill in a game action, such as completing a quest or changing the condition of something: I intend to change the state of blank to blank. Bank to robbed. Widow to happy. Triforce to restored. Chris Crawford calls it an "inverse parser". Combine all of these types of input – tone, timing and constructed statement of fact – and I could craft the dialogue option I was looking for, if perhaps crudely.

What this solution gains you over straight NLP is a chance in hell of interpreting the dialogue, because you've limited it to an established range of statements and questions that can only be about things in the game. To generate meaningful output you still have to encode a crapload of per-character knowledge, what they know and what they don't, what they think about certain conditions being true, how likely they are to believe you, and how they feel about the way you speak to them. This in turn implies systems for calculating the moods of NPCs, tracking their trust levels, and generally simulating their mental space. It sounds like a lot of work, but so is populating a dungeon with monsters and combat systems, and it's actually the exciting part, because it empowers player-authored play. Gain someone's trust to deceive them. Misinform them you're going to rob the bank to distract them. Break the news about their dad in the most compassionate way possible.

Civilization can fill in the blanks back atcha. Abraham Lincoln demands the secret of pottery, where both the verb and object are plugged in from a finite list of possibilities. What if an NPC could fill in your reputation, the most valuable item you're carrying, or the most insulting thing you'd ever said to anyone? It might start to feel like not only did they understand you, but they also are noticing you.

Randy Smith is the co-owner of developer Tiger Style. He'd like to thank the artgame list for their help with this column

" I failed to save the sheriff's life but looted his keys, then entered his house to discover, to my heart-wrenching shock, a young boy 





BY STEVEN POOLE

TRIGGER HAPPY Shoot first, ask questions later

Satisficion guaranteed

As I sighed and sheepishly typed in 'wings' yet again, I knew what I was doing. I was satisficing. *Scribblenauts*, one of the most deeply frustrating and amazing games I have ever played, dares you to be as surreal and inventive as possible. It awards bonuses and style points, and challenges you to complete the same level in different ways. It is a glorious feeling when you see that, yes, sure, you can rope that sheep to a hot-air balloon and fly it back to his friends.

And yet, if inspiration runs dry, you find yourself falling back on a few old standbys: even if some of what should be enormously powerful objects are cunningly weakened (it is somehow heartbreaking even to a non-believer to see how easily God can be killed), you develop a small repertoire of get-out-of-jail-free cards. You feel guilty, but you do it anyway, because there's always the next level to check out. In decision theory and economics, this kind of behaviour – choosing a good-enough approach rather than seeking to optimise or maximise – is called satisficing. And I think videogames too often encourage it.

The same problem, in a different guise, appeared when I was playing *Uncharted 2*, which with all its relentless prodding and funnelling is the exact opposite of *Scribblenauts*. Now, it is unfair to criticise *Uncharted 2* for not being a 'sandbox' game, just as it would be unfair to criticise *LocoRoco* for not being a sci-fi-themed firstperson shooter. Still, let's face it: much of the time in *Uncharted 2*, you are running through lovingly rendered corridors. (This is why the train level is the game's masterpiece: a train just *is* a long corridor.) I was reminded most strongly of *Crash Bandicoot*, another game in which you run up lovingly rendered corridors, except that Crash was a more lovable lead character and had a more satisfying jump animation.

There is something almost hysterical, too, about *Uncharted 2*'s constant interruption of play with mini-cutscenes in an attempt to add unnecessary 'drama'. I lost count of the number of times the game stopped to show me one of Drake's hands slipping off a ledge, the camera swooping up to peer down on my avatar dangling one-handedly over the latest routine precipice, before he, in no way surprisingly, regained a safe grip and the game saw fit to restore my control. The game is like a bossy child, constantly tapping you on the arm and ordering you in a squeaky voice to Feel Excited Now. There is nothing less dramatic than a constant anxiety to keep the tension at a single high pitch.

> "Uncharted 2 is like a bossy child, constantly tapping you on the arm and ordering you in a squeaky voice to Feel Excited Now"

Uncharted 2 does indeed, as people have said, boast one of the best videogame scripts yet seen, which is only to say that it more or less attains the heights of a straight-to-DVD action B-movie. Nonetheless it does provide an irresistibly propulsive element to proceedings – which, unfortunately, I found to work against the most successful aspect, which is the combat. Maybe it's just me, but I didn't try to optimise the way I played the superb set-piece gun battles: instead, I satisficed, stumbling through them any old how because I was impatient to see the next chapter.

In their different ways, then, my experiences with *Scribblenauts* and *Uncharted 2* awakened a concern that the traditional ways in which videogames try to 'motivate' us – through the desire to know what happens next in a scripted narrative, or the desire to acquire new gadgets and weapons, or simply the desire to see what the next puzzle is – are by their very nature also those kinds of structures that will encourage us to satisfice rather than aspire to optimise our strategies of play. Because we are so fixated on what the next thing might be, we hurry to get the current thing out of the way, even if that means doing the minimum required rather than playing with style. In this sense, games' standard strategies of motivation are strangely demotivating.

Now, it's very likely that many people have more self-discipline than I do in this regard; and others wisely choose to balance a satisficing first playthrough with optimising replays. Yet maybe we don't need to be dragged so forcefully through videogames in the first place. Maybe one aspect of the fuzzy ideal I have previously invoked under the slogan 'slow gaming' would be that it afforded us the freedom from narrative (verbal or structural) really to maximise our involvement in what's in front of us. *Noby Noby Boy* has you playing creatively from the start because there is nothing else to do with it: no carrot of a next chapter or new puzzle dangling before your nose, just the bizarre world as it is. It makes no sense even to try to satisfice in *Noby Noby Boy* – which is why, for me, it was the best game of 2009.

Steven Poole is the author of Trigger Happy: The Inner Life Of Videogames. Visit him online at stevenpoole.net



BY N'GAI CROAL

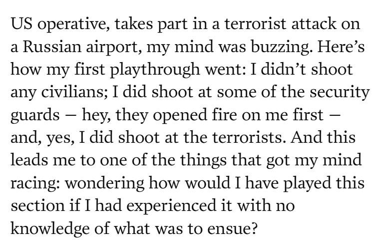
PLAYING IN THE DARK ...because people refuse to see

Learning Russian, with spoilers

In today's blog-Facebook-Twitter-crazed world, avoiding the revelation of key plot twists, cameos, surprises and other elements of our pop culture before we've had a chance to experience them ourselves is more challenging than ever. Perhaps I should have known not to click on the link that followed this tweet: 'Blog entry – *Modern Warfare 2*: The Controversy to Come'. But until I did so, I hadn't a clue that there was anything controversial about the game, other than perhaps the pre-launch imagery of an attack on Washington DC and the potential for some to connect it to the fevered imaginations of right-wing paranoiacs who dream of violently overthrowing their illegitimate Kenyan-Islamo-Communist president. But I digress.

When I finally finished playing through the 'controversial scene' in *Modern Warfare 2*, in which the player, in the role of an undercover US operative, takes part in a terrorist attack on a Russian airport, my mind was buzzing. Here's how my first playthrough went: I didn't shoot any civilians; I did shoot at some of the security guards – hey, they opened fire on me first – and, yes, I did shoot at the terrorists. And this leads me to one of the things that got my mind racing: wondering how would I have played this section if I had experienced it with no knowledge of what was to ensue?

> When I finally finished playing through the 'controversial scene' in Modern Warfare 2, my mind was buzzing



Given the stylish solemnity with which the 'No Russian' sequence begins – first in darkness, with the sounds of men riding an elevator; followed by them stepping out of the elevator and walking at a deliberate pace to the airport security checkpoint; then the brief, awful pause before the terrorists casually and callously open fire – I'm not even sure that I would have shot at the terrorists on my theoretical first playthrough. Partly because I would have been stunned that developer Infinity Ward was putting me in a situation this disturbing, and partly because I would not have wanted to risk a fail state by trying to gun them down. But since I already knew the general premise of this chapter, I found myself only partially creeped out by what I was playing.

Meanwhile, the rest of me was steadily trying to determine the limits of the playable space. Could I shoot the terrorists? Yep, though that quickly produced a fail state – I was gunned down by Makharov or one of his men—followed by a stern warning from the game that I needed to avoid shooting the terrorists in order to maintain my cover. That's when I completely broke character and started shooting civilians in order to see what would happen. This, of course, did not produce a failure, and in fairly short order after that, I reached the end of the sequence... in which Makharov turned on my character and shot him dead, leaving the corpse of an American agent behind to incite World War III.

The response to this chapter was all over the map. Some praised Infinity Ward for pushing the medium forward by taking the risk of placing players in a situation such as this. Others criticised the sequence for being in bad taste and deliberately courting controversy, and yet others accused the developer of failing to set up the situation so that it would be truly plausible. But what I wondered was why Infinity Ward had so tightly circumscribed the player's freedom with fail states given that the character was going to die at the end of the chapter?

What if, in addition to mutely witnessing the carnage or participating in it, the player had been allowed to try to kill all of the terrorists? (In my version, Makharov, for narrative purposes, would have only planned the mission rather than joined in the massacre.) Even if the player succeeded, they would still be trapped on foreign soil and surrounded by a Russian SWAT team with no inclination to do anything other than kill them. At this point, the player would fight his way to the extraction vehicle, only to be shot and killed by Makharov.

It seems like a neat solution. Infinity Ward gets to keep its twist ending and the inciting incident for World War III. Players get more agency to determine how the action plays out within the confines of the plot. The don't-shoot-the-terrorists fail state can be eliminated. It's win-win, right? Only I'm not sure that it's quite so simple. What Infinity Ward was trying to do was create both emotion and narrative meaning out of play. But these goals are often at odds: the more specific the emotion or plot, the more restricted the gameplay must be. And conversely, the more open the gameplay, the less likely it is that a particular emotion or plot point will be conveyed.

Sure, my proposed solution retains the doomed outcome for the player character. But allowing players to unleash their inner Jack Bauer and heroically save the day wouldn't preserve the fatalistic mood that Infinity Ward achieves. I'm not saying No Russian is perfect. But it achieves enough that other developers can build upon its successes and learn from its failures. And for that reason, some Russian is better than no Russian at all.

N'Gai Croal is a writer and videogame design consultant. You can follow him online at ncroal.tumblr.com



tstokes

inbox



Issue 209



ONLINE OFFLINE

Choice cuts from Edge Online's discussion forum

forum.edge-online.co.uk

Topic: Bayonetta 10

This is awesome! Mental as a sack of crack ferrets but it looks like the combat is as solid as it is preposterous. When's it out?

Dan Dare

There is something distinctly Sega about the whole thing, which I loved. For some reason it made me long to plug in my Saturn. As soon as my hair turned into a giant dragon and ate the boss, all the while leaving my avatar totally starkers, I knew this was a game I would be buying.

My GF happened to be sat next to me in the room and she gave it a cursory glance before saying, "That looks interesting. What's it about?"

My reply of "A witch who has guns in her shoes and whose hair eats bad guys whilst leaving her naked" was met with an expression that suggests I may have undone all the progress I made convincing her games these days are a mature medium...

Verbal_Oz

It's debatable whether Nintendo is still teetering on the edge of, or beginning the sharp plunge from, Success Mountain. Two of its most prestigious projects this year have been met with a resounding 'meh', and we now live in uncertain times. I call it the post-*Conduit* age, although it may also be deemed the post-MotionPlus age.

First in line, *The Conduit* was little more than a study in hype. The game's mediocre success was dwarfed by gargantuan expectations. Naturally, the bulk of said expectations were aimed at its visual quality. It was preordained as the game to prove the Wii could stand its ground in the current-gen arena. But if the system couldn't compete on paper, how could it possibly compete in practice? With no decent gameplay to fall back on, *The Conduit* failed.

To be fair, MotionPlus is still young. All I'll say is, so far there hasn't been the Earth-shattering revolution we've been told to expect. Maybe in the future it'll be something brilliant, but my problem isn't with what the MotionPlus is; my problem is with what the MotionPlus stands for.

So why were two of Nintendo's biggest releases of 2009 so uncharacteristic of the Wii itself? We know the Wii can't compete graphically; Nintendo knows it can't compete graphically! The system was never meant to be a graphical competitor; it was meant to be a gameplay competitor. Similarly, the Wii's motion controls were never supposed to be motion-perfect; they were only supposed to offer new ways to play games.

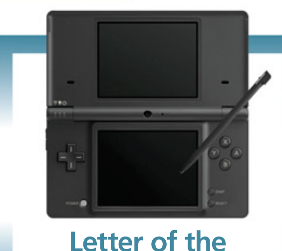
It all reeks of 'giving the public what they want', but why, after creating a system so opposite to what we could ever have anticipated, would Nintendo have any desire to give the public what they want? The public don't know what they want! We're sheep at the best of times! Nintendo has always shunned criticism and continued with its own experiments. Why change now?

Eventually the argument joins the 'realism' debate, which is too long and dreary to go into now, but to sum up, Nintendo should revel in its 'lesser' existence. As explained in The Game OverThinker episode 24, the more 'realistic' PS3/360 games get, the more unrealistic they ultimately seem. By that reasoning, Nintendo has the upper hand as their missing pieces ultimately ask us to fill in the gaps with our own imaginations (remember them?). For example, imagine how sad Lego would be if all the colours and shapes were more realistic, and all you were allowed to build was the real world?

Lack of reality breeds imagination, which in turn offers a far more involving experience. Developers should aspire to keep us at arm's length from reality

Lack of reality breeds imagination, which in turn offers a far more involving experience than HD graphics ever can or will. In theory, developers should aspire to keep us at arm's length from reality as much as possible. It's like what they say about good horror movies: it's not about what you can see, it's about what you can't.

Jonny Pratt



Letter of the month wins a DSi

What about a combination of HD graphics and unreality? How good would *MadWorld* have looked if it had been more sharply rendered? Games like *Rez HD* and *No More Heroes* on Xbox 360 show that there is a place for increased graphical fidelity, but of course never at the expense of imagination.

By the tone of Robert Furze's letter (**E**208), it seems there's a general feeling that console gaming is entering the mainstream. Popular magazines, newspaper supplements and TV shows have sections dedicated to games, even if more highbrow critics avoid the computing world as if their lives depended on it, as suggested in the article 'TV Go Home' (**E**208): "Never played computer games before, hopefully never will again!" (Mark Kermode, Newsnight Review).

I believe this is a temporary illusion, though. I believe that newspaper, magazine and television coverage is stagnating and has perhaps even declined recently, and that in ten years' time it will be the Newsnight Review-type shows that will have a sizeable amount of their coverage dedicated to videogames instead.

Why? Because of scandal and celebrity! The public's thirst for scandal and celebrities shows no sign of abating. The media's obsession



with minor stars and their tragic lives fills up more and more column inches and TV minutes. This is why console gaming will never get the articles and shows it deserves – it just can't compete. If Lara Croft was really trying to adopt a Malawian baby, or Leon Kennedy was seen in a gay bar in Los Angeles, or Marcus Fenix beat up a taxi driver in New York, computer game coverage would be right up there with film and music. But, happily, stars of the console world behave themselves and never get caught falling out of bars or getting in fights in the real world. Even the bona fide celebrities we do have – Shigeru Miyamoto, Hideo Kojima, Reggie Fils-Aime – are clean-cut, and that just doesn't sell. The only time computer games get real coverage is when the games themselves are swept up in a media disgrace, like when someone with serious issues who once played *GTA* kills someone.

Ironically, then, I suspect it will be the more intellectual review shows that will put computer gaming in the spotlight, simply because games are so removed from what they perceive to be the baseness of celebrity culture.

So let's not get too excited at our few column inches in The Sun – that's all we'll get until Shigsy gets himself photographed with a scantily-clad WAG in an Epping nightclub. Let's instead champion heroes like Mark Kermode. He may be happier right now to review films such as Transporter 3 and the movie version of *Max Payne* rather than games such as *BioShock* or *Braid*, but give him a few years, when gaming will be the only form of entertainment left that doesn't have someone from Big Brother in it, and the cultural media will be falling over themselves to run gaming articles.

Ruth Staples

But what's the point of leaning on someone like Kermode? Far better, surely, to get someone like Dara O Briain involved in an anything-goes discussion show, with plenty of new game content to chew over. Trouble is, even in a few years it wouldn't get the green light because gaming would still be too 'niche', and... Hey, let's not do this again. Have a DSi.

If Lara Croft was trying to adopt a Malawian baby, or Marcus Fenix beat up a taxi driver, game coverage would be up there with film and music

I was prompted to write in response to Matthew Leigh's letter in E209 regarding the 'short burst' gaming that people believe is most suitable for handheld devices such as the DS and PSP.

As a poor student who had to travel out of town to go to college, I wanted something to keep me occupied on those long bus journeys to and from the campus. The original DS had recently been released but I was short on money so I picked up a cheap GBA and some SNES re-releases. I had great fun whiling away the journey with the likes of *Yoshi's Island* and *Donkey Kong Country* as they offered immediate 'arcade-style' play within a traditional level-based structure, so there was always a new stage to keep me distracted every day. However, these games demanded quite an investment of time, and there was sometimes a bit of a rush to reach a savepoint before I reached my stop. I had to wonder whether porting home-based games with lengthy excursions between save points was really a good idea, and whether it was a good idea for me to keep buying them.

When I eventually picked up a DS the market was still getting used to the capabilities of the handheld, and although I enjoyed the likes of *Project Rub* and *WarioWare Touched*, I found myself reaching the other extreme of being unsatisfied with the lack of structure in the games; I rarely felt like I had an ultimate goal when playing. While there are a lot more DS games today that offer innovative mechanics within more structured setups (*Ace Attorney*, *Henry Hatsworth*, *Professor Layton*, *Scribblenauts*), the games I was stuck with at the time never held my attention for very long.

Inevitably, I turned to Sony's PSP, picking up cheap oldies such as *Tekken*, *Wipeout*, *LocoRoco* and *Grand Theft Auto* to get started. Generally, I enjoyed these 'traditional' experiences a lot

Continued



We expected more of *The Conduit*, but is the deluge of FPSes an HD Wii may bring really what we want?



Early DS title *Project Rub* may not be the right choice for public transport thanks to the blowing required, but its minigame structure makes it perfect for short bursts



Topic: The spying game

Given the news that the GCHQ (Government Communications Headquarters) is looking to actively recruit via Xbox Live, do you think you have the skillzorz to be the next James Pond?

What attributes do you believe we gamers possess apart from the stated 'quick thinking, problem solving and teamwork'? What would you cite as experience on your CV to substantiate your application? *GoldenEye*, *MW2*, *Geometry Wars* even? Anyone even tempted to enquire? The career of a sexy super-spy could await.

W3881N5

Taking knowledge of spying from *Assassin's Creed* would be counterproductive. Walking amongst a small group of people means you cannot be seen. Sitting on a bench means you cannot be seen. To escape from someone it's best to run up the side of a building and along the rooftops. And so on.

JB

Every Bond film has a driving/chase scene, I'm fairly sure my *Mario Kart* skills would come in handy there, more so than all the *Forza* boys as I'm used to using weapons at the same time.

Needless to say my *SF* skillz would help me pass the hand-to-hand combat training set before me.

www.mariokart64.com

As long as the weapons MI5 give you are in the shape of turtle shells, mushrooms or banana skins, the job's as good as yours.

Heavy Voodoo

You just have to walk at the recommended distance behind your target until the cutscene begins. Easy.

Kow

Just remember to bring tranquilliser darts on all missions. Drake forgot them on all of them except for the museum part. Didn't he feel stupid!

-sigge-

more easily than the more diverse and experimental DS games, but there were still titles that were wholly unsuitable for handheld play. With games such as *Vice City Stories* I had trouble seeing a mission through to the end during a break, and I felt that they demanded more time than I could give, rather like the GBA.

It's making me wonder if the problem lies in the length of the experience, or simply the means by which a game will allow the player to suspend and resume play. I believe that the PSP can deliver further ports of big-screen names without forcing the player through hours of play between each save (it would be a shame if all people had to play on their handhelds were short, forgettable bursts of fun), so why don't developers create their big epics and break them into manageable chunks for the busgoers?
Dan Gassis

Say what you like about PSP Go, but its ability to save your game state at any point in play is a valuable evolution for handhelds. When will Nintendo follow?

In Stephen Poole's article in **E**208 he suggests that it's illogical choices and senseless decision-making that make a television series such as 24 a 'freakshow' and therefore hard to believe. True, the series is pilfering from videogames, but therefore to expect it to behave like a videogame is actually missing a crucial ingredient of what makes good television – that is: bad decision-making happens.

In games, while you're in charge and reasonably competent, bad decisions are generally forced on you, normally through cutscenes where the outcome is predetermined. Otherwise, the game-maker knows that if you're 'in the zone' you'll hurtle through levels taking no damage, which is equally hard to believe. After all, is jumping from a two-storey roof, getting back up and keeping running with no physical effect apart from a small loss of 'health' (whatever that means) credible?

With TV and film, the entire story is forced upon you, therefore bad decisions are embedded, and that's actually more true to life: we all make a mixture of good, bad and disastrous choices – sometimes because we're under pressure, or can't see the full picture, or don't know the full outcome of the decision to be made. These make a story more realistic, add to tension and create more depth.

The challenge is therefore for game-makers to give players choices and make bad decisions less signposted or obvious. That would substantially improve the medium and depth of player involvement.
John Braithwaite



Topic: Gaming just needs McGuffins

Partly because Edge has had a lot of articles/points on storytelling in games of late, I had a think about the last two games I just finished and also the ones that float my boat.

Just finished *Uncharted 1* and *Dead Space* recently, and while they have plots to carry you from level to level, the actual storytelling is pretty daft. And in fairness for a game to work it nearly has to be that way. Games more than films really need McGuffins to carry the progression of levels along.

However, what I loved about both games was the atmosphere. They both make you feel that the whole game world has been thought out and immersive. It's this that more games could use as opposed to incredible tricky plots that go nowhere. It's why *Gears* has a terrible plot but the banter coupled with the weaponry and the architecture of the buildings makes it feel great to play in.

It's also why I found myself groaning when I killed my 1,000,000th enemy in *Uncharted*. It broke the atmosphere and brought me back to the fact it was a game.
Red Dave

To me atmosphere is the key to a good game. Stories in gaming are generally quite poor and whilst they can tell you how you are meant to feel they often fall short, a well crafted atmosphere can (how you do this as a developer I haven't a clue) really let you experience something.

Very rarely do developers manage to get the story told through the playing of the level itself.
Pantyfire

***Gears 2* and *Fable II* are the games that, in recent history, I've found to have the most immersive game worlds. Not through their story, but through their visual design and integrity, great play mechanics and general air of joie de vivre. I cannot think of a single game with a BIG IMPORTANT STORY that has interested me in the slightest.**
Darthjim



***Bayonetta* deserves its plaudits, says Christopher Hodge, despite Sega's game being a genre piece**

Having picked up the latest copy of Edge (**E208**) from my local train station, it was refreshing to see a much-needed return to **Edge** cover design form with the rather gormless-looking zombie hovering (lumbering?) above the coverline 'Dead or alive? Japan's game industry faces its own survival horror'. Covers like **E**208's are not only pleasingly flippant double entendres (the more serious message about the Japanese games industry encoded within the zombie lexicon of your typical survival-horror fare) but also a bold and serious comment about the current state of the medium.

While publishing realities will always militate against future repeat performances, here's hoping that with this latest attempt us **Edge** veterans can look forward to another cover design masterclass along the lines of the fondly remembered **E**122 ('Bored to death of videogames? Gaming reaches its mid-life crisis') and, whisper it, 'The girl issue' (**E**121).
James Borg

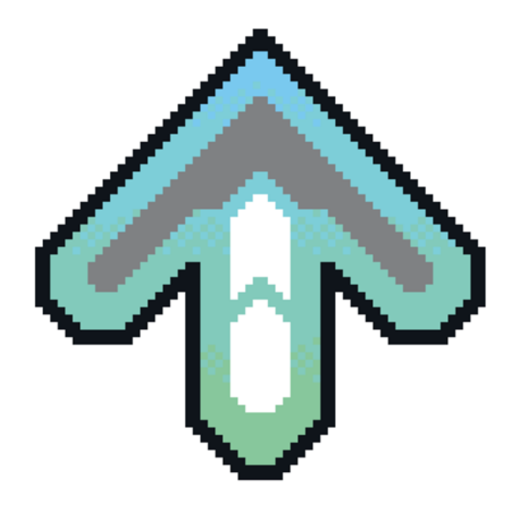
Regarding the cover story in your recent issue, 'Dead or alive?' [**E**208], I think you're confusing the death of creativity with the death of an industry. As we've seen in the film industry, it's familiarity that sells. Sequels and adaptations are churned out by Hollywood as new ideas are too much of a risk for the money men. And the same is inevitably going to happen to gaming.

The games industry in Japan is not going to die, there is just too much money to be made churning out sequels and marrying manga characters to unsuited 2D fighters. Game publishers know the same thing as film producers: put the right character or star on a box and it will sell no matter the quality of the actual product. What we are likely to see is the death of imagination within the industry, as risk-averse financiers withhold funds from new ideas out of fear of making a loss.

I was, therefore, extremely pleased to see your high score *Bayonetta* [**E**209] which, despite being nothing particularly new in the mechanics department, brings an imaginative new character to an (apparently) sublimely made genre piece. The genres are the scaffolding that developers can use to build their greatest achievements, and it's good to see **Edge** championing this.
Christopher Hodge

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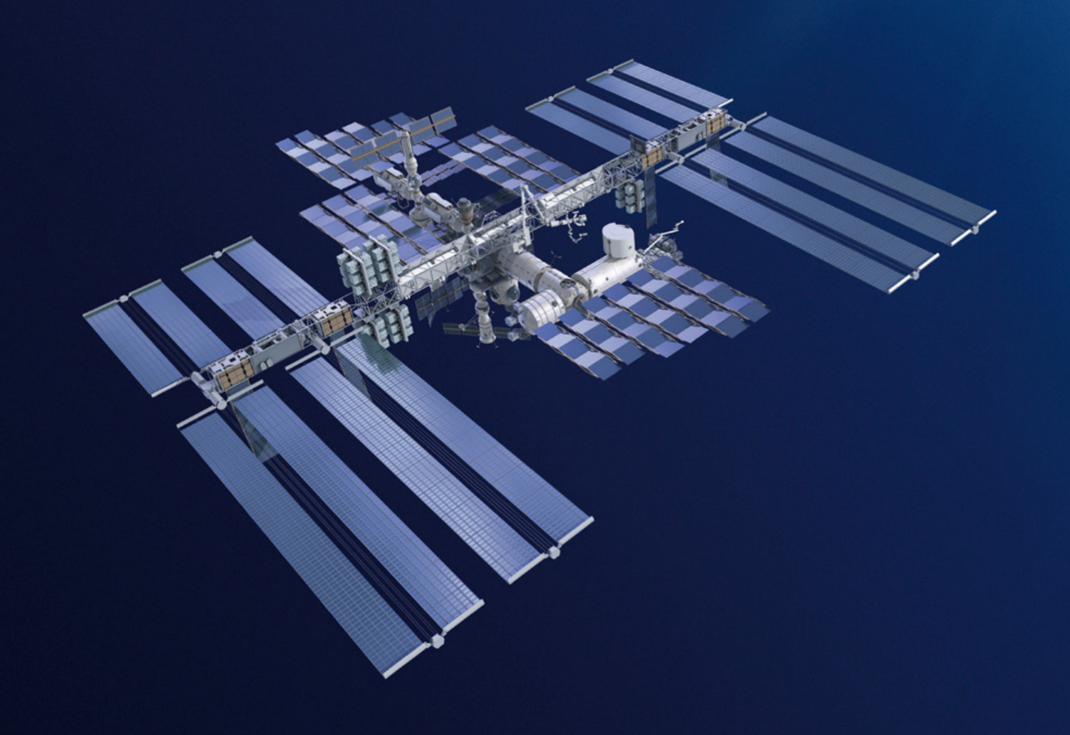
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